

## Engaging Chineseness in Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony*

**D**uring the Second World War, the Nationalist Chinese government mobilized overseas communities to contribute to the war effort through appeals to ethnic loyalty. The slogan "Save the Nation" (*jiuguo*) was commonly invoked implying that even in diaspora, overseas Chinese were somehow members of the Chinese state. The Chinese Republic's authority among overseas Chinese communities was justified through the association between ethnicity and nationhood.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, ethnicity, or "Chineseness," was also used as the cultural basis for political structures and hierarchies within the Chinese community.<sup>2</sup> A sense of Chineseness gave the community a sense of cohesion, but ethnicity was also used to ensure conformity and unity. The sale of Chinese war bonds in Canada provides a case in point:

[The Bond-selling Association in Vancouver] required that each adult male in the Vancouver Chinese community purchase a minimum of Ch. \$50 (about Can. \$16) in Chinese war bonds. Names of those who did not would be published in the Chinese-language newspapers, and those who wished to return to China had first to show the Chinese consulate that they had bought at least the minimum required amount of bonds. (Wickberg 190)

Refusing to demonstrate one's ethnic loyalty was deemed rebellious and therefore required a disciplinary response through social ostracization and the denial of travel privileges. All the institutions involved in this particular campaign—the Chinese media, Chinese consulate, and the Chinese Benevolent Association and other community organizations—owed their existence to some association with ethnicity.

Employed to achieve certain goals such as fundraising, ethnicity itself can be conceptualized as an ideology constructed and expressed through material practices. As Louis Althusser writes in his famous essay on ideological apparatuses, "an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material" (166). Those interpellated as Chinese are expected to act in ways defined by the discourse of Chineseness, which was hegemonically controlled by the community leadership. But the process of ethnic subject formation was complicated through interaction with Canadian society and culture, especially in the context of racism. The World War II period provides a rich historical context in which to examine the discourse of Chineseness in Canada. The war effort fostered a sense of community unity which subsequently propelled the fight for enfranchisement following World War II. Politically, a new generation of community leaders consciously engaged Canadian society hoping to ameliorate the racist conditions that had always plagued the community's existence.

Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* chronicles the experiences of several Vancouver Chinatown children growing up during this period. Originally a short story published almost eighteen years before the novel was completed, the novel provides a literary space for a semi-autobiographical project based on the author's own childhood. Throughout the text, Choy interrogates the process of becoming Chinese, linking ethnic identity formation with various power structures such as the family and the Chinese community-at-large. In this essay, I intend to examine ways in which Choy problematizes the notion of Chineseness and critiques the linkage between ethnicity and power structures. I argue that *The Jade Peony* offers a re-reading of Chinese Canadian history, suggesting ways to rethink the World War II period through a focus on marginalized voices and experiences.

The third part of the novel is narrated from the perspective of Sek-lung (nicknamed Sekky), the third and youngest son of a Chinatown family. I am particularly drawn to this section because Sekky seems to represent the vulnerable and innocent child who is in the process of being formed by (among other things) the discourse of ethnicity. Following Althusser, we may say that he is constantly defined as a subject by various Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) which propagate notions of Chineseness, such as Chinese school, his family, his location in the ethnicized space of Chinatown, Chinese and English media, and so on (see Althusser, 143-45, 170-73). As a child still to be disciplined and shaped according to standards defined as

Chinese, Sekky is often reprimanded for incorrect behavior. As a result, he develops a sense of inferiority, a vision of himself as someone who lacks Chineseness. He thus identifies with models of ethnicity imposed by his family and the community elite in order to compensate for this lack. (I will discuss the theoretical implications of this identification later.)

Sekky's story starts with a provocative declaration: "in 1939, when I was six years old, the whole family—my two brothers and my sister, and all our relatives—considered me brainless" (129). The label "brainless" stems from Sekky's inability to distinguish between the Chinese titles of various relatives.<sup>3</sup> This shortcoming is significant because naming a relative simultaneously establishes the speaker's position in relation to the person named. Thus to misname "third uncle" as "great uncle," for example, not only represents a misidentification of that uncle, but, more importantly, of the self. Misrecognizing one's place (as determined by age, status of parents and so on) constitutes a challenge to the hierarchical nature of family. In a community where family ties are considered of great importance, the family itself is a heavily ethnicized space.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is within the family that Sekky encounters Chineseness as a lived reality, as ethnicity is made a daily reality through interaction with his elders. Misnaming is therefore an act that suggests a potentially rebellious refusal to submit to the community's social standards. Wittingly or not, Sekky casts himself as a dissenting subject who needs to be disciplined and molded until he partakes (and consents) fully in the discourse of Chineseness.

Choy demonstrates how the Chinese family of Chinatown in the 1930s is itself affected by Canadian laws and regulations. For example, Sekky's mother

[is] the birth-mother of both my sister Liang and myself. She had been brought over to Canada from China to become a family servant or concubine, a kind of second wife, after Father's first wife died in China. Kiam [the oldest brother is] the son of Father and his first wife, and Jung [the second brother is] adopted. (131)

Nevertheless, in deference to Canadian laws against polygamy, Sekky's grandmother re/misnames his birth-mother "Stepmother," a position resulting from a negotiation between Chinese family structure and Canadian law.<sup>5</sup> The existence of "paper sons," immigrants who entered Canada after claiming falsified kinship relations, constitutes another example in which legal conditions create familial relations that are "inauthentic." As Sekky observes,

if these persons were also tied to us by false papers to obtain immigration visas, they became "paper sons" or "paper uncles," heirs to a web of illegal subterfuge

brought on by laws that stipulated only relatives of official “merchant-residents” or “scholars” who could immigrate from China to Canada. Paper money could buy paper relatives. (132)

As law and capital mediate subject positions supposedly based on biological kinship, family titles come to designate and conceal relationships simultaneously. Family unity and coherence is maintained through a collective investment in its discursive hierarchy, which includes an implicit (or explicit) agreement to keep certain aspects of family history secret. Thus “false” relations are maintained at the same time as “real” histories become untouchable and unmentionable.

Between 1923 and 1947, Canadian immigration laws excluded anyone of Chinese descent except merchants and students. New arrivals were subject to intensive interrogation by immigration officials, and the improper use of familial titles threatened the survival of those who had entered Canada as “paper” sons and daughters:<sup>6</sup>

one careless word—perhaps because a *mo no* [brainless] girl or a *mo no* boy was showing off—and the Immigration Demons would come in the middle of the night, bang on the family door, demand a show of a pile documents ... separate family members and ask trick questions. Then certain “family” members would disappear. Households would be broken up. Jobs would be lost. Jail and shame and suicides would follow. (135)

The fact that family structures could be unraveled and brought to crisis suggests that the family itself functioned, to use a psychoanalytic term, as a fantasy, masking conditions that remained politically unknowable. Yet regardless of how it was constituted, Chinese Canadians continued to uphold the family as a survival strategy. Indeed, participating in this “cover up” was a key tenet for inclusion within the community, and thus became intricately bound with up with Chineseness itself. In the text, Sekky threatens to rupture this fantasy not only through conscious acts of resistance, but more importantly through slips and mistakes. He inhabits a discursive space that precedes a complete entry into the symbolic order of Chineseness, a space that erupts through mistakes and threatens the symbolic order itself.<sup>7</sup> As Sekky is taught how to be Chinese, this space is brought under control. 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 in and of itself; Chineseness is thus regarded as a fixed, supposedly independent, entity. While Sekky experiences ethnicity in this sense, Choy’s subtly deconstructive reading of identity shows how ethnicity is a social construction closely tied to power relationships.

*secret*

Although ethnic formation occurs through expressions of authority such as scolding, spanking, and so on, Sekky often learns how to be Chinese through relationships with role models imposed by his elders. I would argue that the type of relationship at work here is that of identification. In the context of psychoanalysis, Jean Laplanche and Jean-Baptiste Pontalis write that identification is “not simply one psychical mechanism among others, but the operation itself whereby the human subject is constituted” (206). Stuart Hall notes that identification “is grounded in fantasy, in projection and idealization. Its object is as likely to be the one that is hated as the one that is adored” (3). The profoundly ambivalent nature of this process can be detected in Sekky’s own mixed feelings towards his role models. On one level, he displays a conscious resistance to them insofar as they are imposed upon him. But on another level, Sekky has already internalized his own lack of Chineseness—exemplified by the label of brainlessness—and is attracted to (and indeed desires) idealized figures who seem to possess precisely that which he lacks.<sup>8</sup>

To illustrate this condition, let us consider the first episode in Sekky’s story, which concerns his indirect relationship with Chen Suling, a close friend of Stepmother. Chen is a Christian convert living in China who frequently writes letters to Stepmother telling of the turmoils of life under Japanese occupation. Finally, Stepmother arranges to have Chen brought to Canada as the paper daughter of Third Uncle, who is a merchant. For Sekky, Chen’s impending arrival is experienced as a threat: “‘When Chen Suling comes to Canada,’ Stepmother said ..., ‘she will teach you the right way to be Chinese’” (133). Because she embodies “the right way,” Chen serves a marked disciplinary function, but she does so as a figure who is constituted only through discourse: through her letters and Stepmother’s comments about her. In such presentations, she is made to seem perfect. When Sekky tries to rebel by saying that he will only learn English, “‘Stepmother smile[s]. ‘Suling once won a prize for her English,’ she [says]. ‘If only Suling were here ...’ I hat[e] Chen Suling” (137).

Although Sekky tries to resist Chen’s imposition, there is also a dimension of desire at work here. When he first encounters Chen’s photograph, he is strangely attracted to her image. Noticing her stern look, he remarks that

I thought she should have a steel-edged ruler in each of her hands. Instead, there was an embroidered sharp-clawed dragon slinking down Chen Suling’s wide sleeve. Stepmother noticed me staring at it. (130)

In analyzing Sekky's momentary seduction by the photograph, I find Slavoj Žižek's differentiation between imaginary and symbolic identification useful (see 104-07). For Žižek, the object of imaginary identification is the object or role model it(her)self. By contrast, symbolic identification is concerned with the gaze and therefore the subject position of another person/object. It seems to me that something akin to symbolic identification is at work in this story in spite of the fact that Sekky clearly dislikes Chen and the oppression she represents. By identifying with Chen's gaze, Sekky in fact looks right back at himself; his identification with her represents the internalization of codes of behavior deemed to be Chinese, the development of an ethnic super-ego as it were.

But perhaps because Sekky has yet to mature fully as a Chinese subject, resistance is still possible. His determination to learn English is a case in point. After Stepmother claims that Chen has excellent English, Sekky responds by vowing to become better than Chen (again, the borders between resistance and identification are blurred). In the story, it turns out that Sekky's English skills enable him to read the letter informing him and his mother of Chen's death during a Japanese bomb raid. More significantly, he also learns that Chen's English was never as good as Stepmother had claimed. Opening the Bible left by Chen, he notices the grammatical inaccuracy of the inscription:

TO SEK-LUNG, SUN OF LONGTIME FRIEND LILY. I NEVER TO FORGET  
HER. LEAF JACKET AND BOOK WITH GOD. BLESSINGS.  
- CHEN SULING (142)

The moment Sekky encounters the "real" Chen, however indirectly, she is demythologized and neutralized as a disciplinary apparatus. The revelation that she is someone less than ideal effectively "kills" her:

the dragon in my stomach unclenched—twisted once—and flew away. [Stepmother] folded up the jacket and quickly picked up everything, and silently went up to her room. I never heard Stepmother mention Chen Suling's name again. (142)

Although the loss of Chen is certainly tragic especially for Stepmother, there is nevertheless a sense that Sekky psychologically matures through this loss as he is able, at least partially, to shake off his symbolic identification with her. (As we will see, the motif of loss/growth is repeated later on in the novel.)

Sekky realizes Chen's linguistic shortcomings in reference to notions of standard English, which is closely associated with Canadian culture. In the

context of this novel, the terms Chinese and Canadian are considered diametrically oppositional by both Chinese and non-Chinese. Thus Sekky deploys Canadianness in order to resist Chineseness. He prefers to learn English and, when asked if he is Chinese, exclaims, "Canada!" (135). He even decides to exploit his "brainlessness" consciously and vows to misname Chen intentionally in front of immigration officials. Ironically, Sekky draws upon the racist conditions of his environment to empower himself. In this context, it becomes necessary for him to identify with the West, which is, as *The Jade Peony* demonstrates, an overtly racialized cultural space. As Sekky confesses, "I sometimes wish my skin would turn white, my hair go brown, my eyes widen and turn blue ... and I would be Jack O'Connor's little brother" (134). In reality, of course, Sekky is part of a racially excluded group: "I [am] the Canadian-born child of unwanted immigrants who [are] not allowed to become citizens. The words RESIDENT ALIEN were stamped on my birth certificate, as if I [am] a loitering stranger" (136). Lamenting the futility of trying to be Canadian, he notes that

even if I was born in Vancouver, even if I should salute the Union Jack a hundred million times, even if I had the cleanest hands in all the Dominion of Canada and prayed forever, I would still be *Chinese*. (135, italics in original)

At the same time, the reality "behind" the Chineseness that Sekky resists is actually heterogeneous. In the case of Chen, her ability to speak English and her religious convictions (which caused her to be ostracized by her family) suggest that her own ethnicity is not a traditional, essentialized construction, but rather one influenced by modernity. In this sense, she exemplifies the modern Chinese subject who, both in China and in diaspora, exists in cultural spaces mediated by contact with Western culture, often within quasi-colonial relationships.<sup>9</sup> By exploring Chineseness within this historical context, Choy challenges essentialist, ahistorical notions of ethnicity, treating it instead as a term that is compromised, hybridized, and lacking in authenticity. Yet despite its inherent instability, Chineseness continues to function as a disciplinary apparatus. For Stepmother, Chen functions as a symptom of her own marginalized position within her family and community, providing a source of discursive power over her son. On a broader level, Chineseness can be said to function similarly across the community as elders impose it as a fixed reality while obscuring the complex "real" experiences of the Chinese in Canada. By suggesting that Chen's role as the ideal Chinese subject is maintained independent of, even in spite of,

her actual characteristics, Choy illustrates the contingent nature of being named ethnic. Chen functions as the embodiment of Chineseness not because she actually is that but rather because Stepmother has named her as such. Rather than being merely descriptive of cultural practices, ethnicity is first and foremost related to power relationships within a community, and emerges as a construct used to maintain hegemony.

Interrogating both Canadian and Chinese identities, Choy alerts us to the complexities of ethnic identifications in an environment where a certain ethnic community (in this case Chineseness in Chinatown) is ghettoized within a larger Canadian context. In the end, a complete identification with either is impossible; the Chinese Canadian subject must always negotiate these contradictory positions and racialized identity emerges as a site of hybridity and contamination. As Sekky demonstrates, being Chinese Canadian is about negotiating cultures in ways that may privilege one over the other at any given point. At the same time, such an identity continues to contest the boundaries of Canadian culture and Chineseness itself. In the context of Chinatown, Sekky notes that

all the Chinatown adults were worried over those of us recently born in Canada, born "neither this nor that," neither Chinese nor Canadian, born without understanding the boundaries, born *mo no*—no brain. (135)

Choy explores the possibility of agency emerging out of a need to negotiate forms of racialization. The notion of "Chinese Canadian" is, from the very start, a tenuous site, positioned in a social context that regards the two terms as oppositional. Historically, this ambivalent term gained currency as a political identity for a new generation during the 1940s. By pursuing the notion of Chinese Canadian, this generation in effect rejected essentialist versions of both Chinese and Canadian identities. In an admittedly positive reading, what resulted was a collective effort to challenge both traditions in order to demand an equal place in Canadian society. Fifty years later, the vision of a Canadian identity that is deracialized is still to be achieved, but Chinese Canadians have created a political position, however tenuous, from which to fight for that vision.

**W**e have seen how Chineseness, despite its inconsistencies and internal differences, is employed in order to maintain community hierarchy. I would now like to turn my attention to ways in which Chineseness itself is constructed as difference through a reading of the concluding chapters



of *The Jade Peony*. These chapters deal with a particularly sensitive aspect of Chinese Canadian history, that of Japanese-Chinese relations in Canada during World War II.<sup>10</sup> Choy reconstructs a period in which Chinese Canadians were preoccupied with the "Japanese threat" and the discourse of Chineseness was inextricably tied to the presence, both real and imagined, of the Japanese in Canada. Since 1937, the Chinese community had been following events in China closely as Imperial Japanese armed forces gradually occupied the Northeast (Manchuria) and moved into Central and Southern China. Guangdong, the region in Southern China that produced the most immigrants, was eventually occupied. Encouraged and exploited by the Chinese government, overseas anti-Japanese sentiment grew as a response to conditions in China. Although the spread of such sentiment in Chinese Canadian communities, as the story of Chen Suling illustrated, was largely due to personal reasons, the unique political and psychological context of the Chinese diaspora also played a part in its development.

Separated from their embattled "homeland," Chinese Canadians could only experience the war as a discursive event perpetuated through language and media. As Sekky notes, "the enemy was everywhere. The *Vancouver Sun* said so. Newsreels said so. Hollywood and British movies said so. All of Chinatown said so, out loud" (171). But regardless of how much the war was discussed, the community could not escape its own physical separation from the sites of conflict. China became a culturally and geographically unattainable place and an object of desire in itself. An overinvestment in ethnic identity developed in response to feelings of exile and alienation as Chinese Canadians played out the ideology of ethnicity through material practices such as buying war bonds. At the same time, continuing (re)assertions of Chineseness only served to highlight the community's own sense of estrangement; be(com)ing Chinese became a drive that, in the psychoanalytic conception of the term, could never be fulfilled. The domination of nationalism in the community can therefore be read as a reflection of fundamental insecurities over ethnic identity in a racialized society.

Anti-Japanese sentiment became an integral part of being Chinese in Canada, but the shift in location from China to, in this case, the West Coast profoundly changed the relationship between Chinese and Japanese groups. While the Japanese were clearly imperialist aggressors in China, the relationship between the two communities in Canada was not as clearly defined. Given the prevalence of anti-Japanese propaganda both in Canada

and China, the conflation of Imperial Japan with the Japanese Canadian community was a process of scapegoating which simultaneously constructed a notion of "Japanese."<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, Žižek has discussed anti-Semitism in similar terms:

"Jew" appears as a signifier connoting a cluster of supposedly "effective" properties (intriguing spirit, greedy for gain, and so on), but this is not yet anti-Semitism proper. To achieve that, we must *invert* the relation and say: they are like that . . . *because they are Jews*. (italics in the original). (96)

Substituting "Japanese" for "Jew," we can detect a similar process at work in the novel. Choy highlights the prevalence of stereotypes in Sekky's description of the Japanese: "the monsters with bloodied buck teeth, no necks, and thick Tojo glasses" (196). By suggesting that Chinatown was ultimately fighting a "cartoon character," Choy exposes the constructed nature of the Chinese-Japanese conflict. He is also careful to relate anti-Japanese sentiment to material concerns, detailing how Chinese Canadians readily took advantage of low property prices in the wake of the Japanese Canadian evacuation, a move seen by some as retribution for losses in China (see 234-35). The conscious effort by the community to identify itself with the allied effort (as Chiang Kai-shek was doing from Chongqing) was a politically and economically strategic move—after the war, Chinese Canadians argued that they had demonstrated their loyalty to Canada through military service and thus deserved enfranchisement. But by showing how claims to ethnic identity are often achieved through processes of marginalization, Choy critiques the very construction of ethnicity itself, revealing its human costs. The final chapters of *The Jade Peony* constitute a significant intervention, which critically examines this aspect of the Chinese Canadian experience, using this shameful episode to interrogate the construction of Chineseness itself.

Sekky's own sense of ethnicity develops within the context of wartime politics. He is obsessed with war-related paraphernalia and images, and frequently indulges in war games and other fantasies which revolve around the "Japanese threat." After several incidents land him in trouble, his parents ask Mrs. Lim, a neighbor and close friend of the family, to watch him after school, a task that eventually falls on Lim's adopted daughter Meiying. The relationship between Sekky and Meiying can be read initially as another example of the kind of idealizing relationship he endured with Chen Suling. Meiying is, after all, regarded by people around Sekky as the perfect Chinese daughter: attractive, hardworking, adept at housework, and fluent in

Chinese (even Mandarin Chinese!). Sekky and his siblings are urged to imitate her. But when he learns that Meiying is carrying on a secret romantic relationship with a Japanese Canadian, their relationship enters a new stage in which Sekky must negotiate the contradiction between her role as the embodiment of idealized Chineseness and actions that cast her as a traitor. After all, anti-Japanese resistance was an axiomatic part of being Chinese during the period:

Everyone knew the unspoken law: *Never betray your own kind*. Meiying was Chinese, like me; we were our own kind . . .  
I could see father's outrage if he ever found out, and I shuddered to imagine how horrified Stepmother would be: *No, no, not Meiying, not the perfect one!* (214)

At this point, Sekky seems to have accepted conventional definitions of ethnic loyalty, but as those definitions are brought to a point of crisis, he tries to negotiate the dilemma before him:

perhaps I could do some damage in my own way, weaken the enemy. Trap her. Trap them both. Meanwhile, I could pretend to be Meiying's friend: I could be a spy. Turn her in later to the [Clan association] or the RCMP. (215)

As a spy, one can "play both sides of the fence" by deferring a final demonstration of allegiance to one party which would require the betrayal of the other. While unstable, the position (which is drawn from the rhetoric of wartime) nevertheless allows for the temporary co-existence of contradictory loyalties. For Sekky, this position proves to be more difficult to maintain; once Sekky allows himself a space in which to be loyal to Meiying, betrayal becomes more and more difficult. When Meiying makes him promise that he will not divulge their secret, Sekky grapples with the request, uncomfortably negotiating his contradictory obligations.

We can detect signs of this subjective collapse after Sekky returns from his first trip to Oppenheimer Park (a central meeting place for the Vancouver Japanese community located on/near Powell Street) with Meiying:

I was thrilled to have met the enemy, yet still so reluctantly dazzled by their baseball skills that I found myself tongue-tied and mostly silent. I would begin to speak, stop, then begin again. (214)

Although it is not clear what exactly thrills Sekky, the passage suggests that he perceives a discrepancy between his previous conceptions of the Japanese and what he actually encounters; skill at baseball does not seem to fit in with the cartoon-Tojo invoked earlier. Sekky begins to realize what is left

unsubsumed by the designation "Japanese" as it is employed by the Chinese. The realization of this excess reality marks a moment of rupture in anti-Japanese discourse and by extension, the discourse of Chineseness itself. Although the assumption that one can be a spy may be comforting, Sekky's resolve breaks down as the story continues and the result is a certain paralysis of response. He never does turn Meiying in to any authority and actually begins to lie to his parents regarding their activities. He fails at spying precisely because he is unable to take the final and crucial step of betrayal. As Sekky and Meiying return to Chinatown after that first encounter, Meiying asks,

"what are you thinking?"

"He's a sporty guy," I said, meaning to say that I liked his nerve. But I guess she thought I liked him. She broke into a smile, as if a wonderful thing had just happened between us.

"Oh Sekky! If only you were the world!"

She threw her arms around me, totally catching me off guard, then quickly let me go. (216)

Sekky is not only thrown off guard physically, but more so by Meiying's failure to recognize his intentions. His inability to correct her draws him into her world as a confidant. The metaphor of being "on guard" reveals Sekky's precarious hold on his own beliefs; perhaps it is a subtle hint from Choy just how precarious ethnicity can be as well. As in the case of Chen Suling, we witness another extinction of a role model, but unlike Chen, Meiying remains, continuing to be an object of identification which leads Sekky away from his previous notions of Chineseness. In this sense, identification changes from a tool of discipline to a move that threatens hegemony itself.

Meiying and Sekky confront the very terms of Chineseness through her relationship and his complicity; Meiying herself serves a deconstructive function in Choy's narrative. We can locate this function, for example, in her interest in the notion of alliances, a term again drawn from wartime rhetoric. Meiying's understanding of the word emphasizes equality and individual agency within collective action. Choy juxtaposes these political ideals against the quasi-totalitarian setting of Vancouver's Chinatown, a place where loyalty and submission are demanded and displayed physically through badges which proclaim one's Chinese ancestry. Against a social context dominated by hierarchies that serve to reinforce ethnicity, the notion of alliance becomes subversive even as it is constantly invoked in the common discourse of the time. When Sekky asks Meiying why she still talks to Kazuo, her Japanese boyfriend, she simply explains that they are friends,

and friends have alliances; she has, in fact, used one alliance to subvert another, namely that of the Chinese community with Canada, deconstructing alliances in the name of alliances themselves.

If the ending of *The Jade Peony* can be described as tragic, it is especially so because Meiying's rebellion is unsuccessful and finally leads to her death. Her abortion symbolizes the eradication of an unborn child whose very existence embodies the deconstruction of boundaries between Chinese and Japanese. In the death of mother and unborn child, the symbolic order of Chineseness maintains itself through the cruel repression of dissent. But when the human costs of such an act are considered, her death leads to a shift in consciousness for characters such as Sekky. One of the most poignant moments in the book occurs when Sekky, after seeing Meiying's lifeless body, turns to Stepmother and finally calls her Mother. Throughout the story, Stepmother had raised doubts about the scapegoating of Japanese Canadians, although such comments were ignored or belittled by the men of the family. She was also very attentive to Meiying, acting almost as surrogate parent. Although she remains for the most part an underdeveloped character, we get a glimpse of a free-thinking person trapped in a world in which her status denies the privilege of speaking and the privilege of being heard. In this sense, she is something of a parallel character to Sekky in that both are marginalized. His act of (re)cognition represents a conscious choice to align his symbolic identifications with the potentially subversive. The doubts sown through his interactions with Meiying are brought to fruition when he identifies with his mother's dissenting gaze. Unlike Meiying, Mother knows how to survive, and although that may require acts of compromise, she finally emerges as an independent character towards the end of the novel. When Sekky declares "Mother, I am here" (238), he consciously inscribes his own identity within the mother-child relationship, a relationship that Choy seems to privilege here as liberating against the patriarchal culture of Chinatown. Juxtaposing this moment of enlightenment with Meiying's tragic death, Choy ends the novel on a provocatively disturbing yet hopeful note.

In recent years, several landmark anniversaries have brought the period recounted in *The Jade Peony* into the forefront of Chinese Canadian community consciousness. For example, the fiftieth anniversary of the *Citizenship Act* was celebrated in 1997, and fifty years ago this year, Asian Canadians cast their first votes as citizens. In recognition of these events,

recent projects such as the Chinese Canadian Military History Museum in Vancouver have sought to preserve the history of that period.<sup>12</sup> Read alongside such attempts to entrench a community history, texts such as *The Jade Peony* remind us that the processes of identity formation often have disturbing historical consequences. The commemoration of alternative, even shameful, histories is therefore crucial to developing a critical engagement with ethnicity itself. I would argue that Choy writes against prevalent narratives of the 1940s by suggesting that they marginalize issues such as gender, sexuality and interethnic relations. His critique is launched subtly, from apparently “innocent” children’s voices which hide more subversive elements in the narrative.<sup>13</sup> Such strategic moves allow him to engage official versions of community history (the valorization of Chinese Canadian soldiers, for example) while recovering previously marginalized voices.

In a recent essay entitled “Can One Say No to Chineseness?” Ien Ang argues that while Chineseness possesses “operative power as a cultural principle in the social constitution of identities *as Chinese*,... [the point is to] investigate how this category operates in practice, in different historical, geographical, political, and cultural contexts” (227, italics in original). Choy writes out of specific historical and personal circumstances which frame the expression of Chineseness in Canada and he is aware that the differentiation between oppressor/oppressed is not necessarily synonymous with white/Chinese. In writing about the non-elite, Choy displays an interest in the possibilities of resistance, in the possibility of articulating a Chinese Canadian identity that is inclusive through the exposure of past exclusions. Ethnic subject formation is therefore presented as a dynamically contested process.

In demythologizing Chineseness, he directs our attention to the fact that ethnicity is not so much a matter of conforming to tradition as a continuing process of social (re)construction. As Ang writes,

‘if I am inescapably Chinese by *descent*, I am only sometimes Chinese by *consent*. When and how is a matter of politics.’ The politics involved here reaches far beyond identity politics of individual subjects, in diaspora or otherwise. What is at stake are the possibilities and responsibilities of these subjects to participate, as citizens of the world, in the ongoing political construction of world futures. (242, italics in original)

Writing in the 1990s, Choy’s refusal to adopt an uncritical stance towards Chineseness alerts us to the fact that as the Chinese community continues to change, the expression of Chinese ethnicity is in itself (and always has

been) a contingent condition. In making such connections, he ultimately expresses a renewed commitment to the discourse of Chineseness, to the possibility of a more enlightened and humane expression of the same.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Lisa Lowe writes, in an Asian American context, that projects of nationalism negate "the material conditions of work and the inequalities of the property system,... inspir[ing] diverse individuals to identify with the national project" (2). Appeals to ethnicity within the Chinese community similarly "smooth out" internal differences. For a discussion of the links between conceptions of ethnicity and modern Chinese nationalism, see Chun.
- 2 While I am interested in situating my discussion within the experiences of Chinese Canadian communities during the 1930s and 1940s, I can only give a brief outline of this history in this essay. Works such as Chan, Wickberg, and Yee provide a more complete account of the time period.
- 3 Chinese is a language which contains multiple terms of familial address differentiating the various relationships possible within a family.
- 4 The prevalence of clan associations in the early Chinese community demonstrates the importance of family ties. For a discussion of such formations, see Wickberg.
- 5 Choy does not specify why Stepmother was not able to assume the title of First Wife after the death of the first wife, although it should be noted that polygamy was an accepted practice in China at the time. While one can make cultural speculations, the issue seems fundamentally unresolved in the text. Nevertheless, it is clear Stepmother did not merely "replace" the First Wife, and held a correspondingly inferior position in the household.
- 6 At a recent talk at the University of British Columbia, Choy mentioned that many Chinese Canadians led a sort of double life during this time period, living a "paper" identity for legal purposes even as they used their actual family names in the safety of the Chinatown community.
- 7 A useful way of conceptualizing this condition is to read Sekky's "pre-Chinese" space as similar to that notion of semiotic as described by Julia Kristeva.
- 8 Two key figures in Sekky's development I do not examine are his grandmother (Poh-Poh) and his teacher Miss Doyle. While processes of identification can be discerned in both relationships, the contexts in which Sekky interacts with the two women are far more complicated. A sufficient reading of these relationships is beyond the scope of this essay.
- 9 For a discussion of the problematic nature of essentialist dichotomies between Chinese and Western culture in the context of modernity, see the Preface to Chow.
- 10 There is surprisingly little written and said about this subject. To cite an example from my own experience, I once asked the former Chinese Benevolent Association of Vancouver English secretary (active during the War) about the subject. I was told curtly that the communities did not interact all that much. Historical records would prove otherwise, as would the oral histories of other elders.

- 11 We can see a similar process at work in the development of anti-Japanese racism among mainstream Canadian communities. Such processes would lead historically to the internment of Japanese Canadians during World War II.
- 12 The Museum mentioned is housed at the Vancouver Chinese Cultural Centre Museum and Archives. It emphasizes valiant records of military service, focusing on the importance of that experience to the fight for enfranchisement. Although it is important that such projects be available to the public, I simply want to point out that it can present only a limited reading of a complex history.
- 13 At the same talk (see note 6), Choy remarked (perhaps somewhat facetiously) that he has been spared much criticism from the Chinese community because his use of child narrators has protected him from accusations of "airing dirty laundry." Choy also noted that his current work-in-progress, conceived as a sequel to *The Jade Peony*, may not fare quite as well because of his use of adult narrators.

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