

## WAYSON CHOY

### Between (Hi)Story and Space: Wayson Choy's Postmodern Chinatown

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Wayson Choy's *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Memoir* (1999) is a literary journey revisiting the author's past through memory while also reconstructing it. Intimate, nostalgic, and playfully ironic, Choy's self-portrait aims to unravel the importance of Chinatown in his understanding of himself as a Chinese Canadian writer. The work begins with a real-life mystery and a quest for identity prompted by a mysterious phone call to the middle-aged author:

"I saw your mother last week."

The stranger's voice on the phone surprised me. She spoke firmly, clearly, with the accents of Vancouver's Old Chinatown: "I saw your *mah-ma* on the street."

Not possible. This was 1995. Eighteen years earlier I had sat at a St Paul's Hospital bed beside Mother's skeletal framework while she lay gasping for breath: the result of decades of smoking. . . .

"You must be mistaken," I said, confident that this woman would recognize her error and sign off.

"No, no, not your mother"—the voice persisted—"I mean your *real* mother." (3-4)

With the realization that he may have been adopted, and that the loving

parents he believed to be his biological family had perhaps shrouded his identity in secrecy, the narrator begins to look towards Chinatown to recuperate his past. As he navigates through the Chinatown of his boyhood, he unfolds layers of stories and some mysteries; he recalls the bodily experience of long-vanished places, such as theatres and stores. The title of the book is playful yet ambiguous: paper is a Chinese invention but it assumes multiple meanings in this memoir. He recalls the paper snake toy that gave him pleasure in Ming Wo's Hardware store and the falsified paper documents that were often required to circumnavigate racist, exclusionary immigration laws. The title alerts us to the "paper brides," women who appropriated the legal papers of the deceased to immigrate to Canada. In *Paper Shadows*, the identities proclaimed on official paperwork are not always genuine.

Through the gaze of the narrator's memory, the reader can picture a Chinese immigrant family in 1940s Vancouver living within a few blocks of Chinatown, the father often away working as a cook on a Canadian Pacific steamship liner, the mother staying home to take care of the five-year-old son. Choy writes:

Mother adjusted unwillingly to Father's long absences at sea. Each time he returned, she would wait up for him, however late his arrival. When thick fog or storms delayed him, she still waited up. (37)

This waiting scene is typical in the everyday life of the Chinese diasporic community in Canada, reflecting the author's own story of his childhood—a retrospective construction of himself in a complex narrative in which the spatial metaphors of Chinatown merge with his personal family stories. These stories are the imaginative building blocks of this postmodern *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman*: the story of the writer's development as a Chinese Canadian, a fable of identity, a postmodern threading of the real and the imagined, the fragmented and the open-ended. Like many stories of historiographic metafiction, this memoir relies on a mixture of identity and imagination, mythology and reality, nostalgia and irony.

Wayson Choy was born Choy Way Sun on April 20, 1939, in Vancouver, as he announces in his introduction, giving us "the

documented facts,” which are based, as he writes in the same paragraph, on “the *false paper names*, officially recorded in my parents’ immigration documents” (14, italics in the original). From the start, there is a suspicion and skeptical questioning of the official history that was based on falsified paper work that was a political and social reality for minority groups like the Chinese, the result of subversive attempts to circumnavigate the exclusionary laws. It is also noteworthy that April 20, 1939 was Adolf Hitler’s fiftieth birthday, a national holiday in Germany at the time. The occasion came with extravagant demonstrations of the Nazis’ military prowess that would soon throw the world into the turmoil of the Second World War, in which China was on the side of the Allies. This political reality of the Second World War would shape Choy’s childhood and become a theme in his writing. His childhood includes images of soldiers in Chinatown and stories of past and present racial discrimination. This Chinese Canadian history includes the Chinese Head Tax in the 1890s and “The Day of the Shame,” when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1923, on July 1, ironically also Dominion Day or Canada Day. These ironies and tensions abound in the identity construction of Choy’s younger self.

But there are other histories that are more integral to his Chinese Canadian culture and linked to specific expectations. They all feed into his personal history that constructs the identity of this first-person narration, in which the search for identity becomes a search through history. “Think about your Chinese name” (15), his mother tells him: *Way Sun*, a name bestowed by his grandfather, is an old Chinese epigram which means “to rehabilitate” (16), the name itself becoming performative, embodying its future action. In this way, history—both recent and distant—threads itself into Choy’s memoir, addressing and rehabilitating the injustices. Choy writes:

Until after the Second World War, no Chinese, even those born in Canada, like me, were given citizenship: I was a *Resident Alien*, forbidden to vote or to enter any profession, including the law, teaching, medicine and engineering. (74)

There is another historical phenomenon that comes in, more fraught with internal judgement, linked to the bachelor uncles who populate the

narrative, who were

not of the first Chinese who came in the 1850 to pan for gold, but the Chinese who came during the railway and steamship day of British Columbia. Chinatown called them “bachelor men.” (72)

The bachelor men are a fringe group within Chinatown culture that the middle-aged narrator seems to identify with, as an unmarried man in his fifties at the time of writing. With a certain playfulness, the memoir calls attention to the blemishes of official history, revealing its unreliability, its tensions and ironies. But there is also an experiential reality, a sensuous experiencing of Chinatown—a spatially lived reality that creates its own memory and truth for the narrator.

Choy grew up in Vancouver’s Chinatown, nurtured by its tastes, smells and sounds, and even its ghosts, which breathe life into his literary creations decades later. Chinatown concretizes Choy’s childhood experience, not only shaping his own ethnic identity but also birthing his desire—his hunger—to constantly reexamine and reconstitute his identity as a second-generation Chinese Canadian. When asked in an interview if his two novels are *memoir-esque*, Choy answered:

They are based on my background, and I think I am the kind of writer who is not inventive in the sense of writing sci-fi or writing a story that clearly came out of the imagination. My imagination is connected to my life experience. I’m just that kind of writer. I know it is a limitation, in a way, but also it is not because you are then focused on something you can bring depth to. As I say, I don’t know what I know until I write it. (Reed and Choy 2014, 45)

Choy’s work records social histories and memories, and it tells stories and creates mythologies bound together through an intimate sense of the Chinatown community and its place in Canada and the wider world.

There occurs a blurring of boundaries between memoir and fiction, which reveal similar preoccupations and themes. In *The Jade Pony* (1995), which won the Trillium Award, being a Chinese in Second World War Vancouver is equated to being an alien. The third brother Sek-Lung (nicknamed Sekky) speaks for many others when he describes

his heritage using words that will be echoed in the memoir:

I was the Canadian-born child of unwanted immigrants who were not allowed to become citizens. The words RESIDENT ALIEN were stamped on my birth certificate, as if I were a loitering stranger. (153)

Likewise, in the Giller Prize finalist *All that Matters* (2004), a novel set during the same era, also in Vancouver, the narrator Kiam-Kim wants to enlist in the Canadian army to fight in the Second World War. But he is discouraged:

On those documents [such as birth documents and travel certificates] I was designated "Resident Alien." The rumour was that because of our alien status, our yellow skin, and our slanty eyes, the young men of Chinatown would be discouraged from signing up. (285)

Choy's Chinatown childhood memories thread through these works, weaving together a vibrant tapestry out of individual and communal lives, a textured reality of social, economic, and cultural existence infused with a historical awareness.

Writing about "Chineseness" outside of China is not an easy project. The term is fluid, with the different waves of Chinese immigrants coming to Canada and the cross-cultural conversations between new immigrants and the host country. Cultural identities evolve to create hybrid identities when they meet other cultures. In her book, *On Not Speaking Chinese*, Australian critic Ien Ang argues against the hegemonization of Chineseness:

Chineseness is a category whose meanings are not fixed and pre-given, but constantly renegotiated and rearticulated, both inside and outside China. . . . Diasporas are transnational, spatially and temporally sprawling sociocultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original "homeland" . . . It is the myth of the (lost

or idealized) homeland, the object of both collective memory and of desire and attachment, which is constitutive of diasporas, and which ultimately confines and constrains the nomadism of the diasporic subject. (Ien Ang 2005, 25)

Ang describes the poignant moment when the subject may feel a certain pressure toward a specific diasporic identification with a mythic homeland. She leaves us with a strong sense of the complexities of the Chinese diasporas. Her insights apply to Choy's writing. Being Chinese means to be repeatedly reminded of otherness and not-belonging. But Chineseness was nothing more than a racialized category, and Chinatown is an institutionalized urban space with a strong racial tenor. Consequently, as cultural geographer Kay J Anderson sums it up, the concept of Chinatown is more than the physical location of a community, and it is an idea that "has been a critical nexus through which the race definition process was structured" (Anderson 1987, 580).

*Paper Shadows* offers a cartographical representation of Vancouver's Chinatown that spatializes the everyday activities of its dwellers, facilitating a reimagining of an active and lively community that fosters multicultural development in Vancouver. In this sense, through his childhood memory of the 1940s—Chinese opera, food, festivals, and family relations—Choy transforms a static, institutionalized, and racialized urban space into a dynamic, individualized and vibrant cultural space. French cultural theorist Michel de Certeau used the term "spatial stories" to emphasize the interdependency of textual narratives and spatial practices. When people move through urban space, they craft individualized histories infused with personal meanings. Choy's unique way of navigating Chinatown creates a literary itinerary as spatial practice. For de Certeau, a place is "an instantaneous configuration of positions," and thus entails "an indication of stability" (de Certeau 2011, 117). If Chinatown is merely perceived as an urban physical place, it falls into the racialization of the community. However, Choy mobilizes the idea of Chinatown as cultural space, which is created by the practices of the community. "Space is a practiced place," de Certeau adds (117). By composing stories about Chinatown and its residents, Choy tactically reconstructs the public image of Chinatown, transforming the

victimized urban community into a historical subject, an attempt at an honest and unadulterated retelling of history, while also composing his younger self. These kinds of stories, in de Certeau's words, "carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places" (118). Thus, Chinatown becomes the "practiced place" which embodies the landscape of Chinese ethnic history in exile and also an important cultural legacy in Canada's multicultural history.

In *Paper Shadows*, we discern many ironic layers as Choy composes his self-portraits, snippets of images and memories that create the identity which is never stable or fully defined but always reveals tensions and fractures. While the characters in his novels are uniquely different in life experience and self-realization, they all mimic Choy's self-presentation in his memoir, and perhaps this gives him different possibilities to unfold his Chinatown years. Choy speaks and deals in a language that has become accessible to members outside the Chinatown community. Through the spatial stories of Chinatown, Choy tactically negotiates his identity within the larger domain of coastal space in Vancouver.

On the surface, Choy appears to be raised with a different culture and mindset in an exclusive community that was Vancouver's Chinatown. Chinese culture appears prominently throughout Choy's upbringing, and his surroundings seem to hold on to Chinese culture with regards to food, entertainment, beliefs, and other everyday practices. However, it is too simplistic to read Choy's work as the typical diasporic "unbelonging"—neither here nor there, or Canada as the unhomely new home and old China as the far-away longed-for home. For Choy, Chinatown is his belonging and longing, and his writing radiates his cultural commitment to this special community. He complicates and intervenes the so-called second-generation struggles in identity negotiation and cultural belonging, and demonstrates that Chinatown is an important part of Vancouver's multicultural growth. He writes:

My English, however, centered around the boyish images of Hollywood. Nothing Chinese could save me. I saw cowboys everywhere. I collected cowboy comics. And when I chose a bedtime book, it was always an English-language book, and some of my babysitters even read them aloud to me . . . Soon,

Chinatown began to fade, like a ghost. I was turning into a banana: yellow on the outside and white on the inside. (84)

Being a “banana” indicates “a reductionist attitude to issues of culture, community, and race” (Khoo 2003, 1). It implies that one cannot be Chinese and Canadian simultaneously and that being a Chinese in multicultural Canada means being positioned in an in-between space: not really excluded but also not fully included. Choy confronts his identity-changing alongside Chinatown’s “fade.” His literary tactics remind us of Lisa Lowe’s critical interrogation of ethnic subjectivity in diasporic culture. Lowe argues that “the processes that produce such identity are never complete and are always constituted in relation to historical and material difference” (Lowe 1996, 64). In this way, Choy questions simple and closed understandings about what it means to be Chinese in Canada, and he turns Chinatown into a liminal space for diversity development and possible different self-realizations especially for a second-generation Chinese immigrant.

When his family moves to their new house on Keefer Street, little Choy feels that there is a ghost living with them due to the recurring noises of nighttime. And they call that ghost *bak kwei*, “a white man’s ghost” (*Paper Shadows* 32). This concept suggests something of the Chinatown people’s precarious existence during war time, their alienated and marginalized status within the large white hegemony of Vancouver’s cityscape. When Choy revisits those childhood ghost memories with his mother in his twenties, the two of them logically conclude that it is because “Vancouver is located on a fault line. The earth moves. The noise was the house settling, the foundation shifting” (33). This spatial instability, however, reflected the ever-evolving definition of Chineseness for the diasporic community. In addition, Choy is masterful in capturing the unique weathered look and moody climate of the coastal city. Likewise, in the novel *The Jade Peony*, Sekky’s older sister Jook-Liang says, “The spring sun overhead reminded me it was nearing twelve o’clock: the mill whistle by the BC docks would bellow soon. The air felt wet and warm, spring and summer, though it was mid-spring. Small clouds scudded cross the mountain tops” (*The Jade Peony* 44).

The location of Vancouver on the costal land does not only bring



nighttime noises and weathered looks, but also a particular historical social circumstance during the Second World War, when the Canadian military were omnipresent and the *Chinese Times* was filled with maps of Europe and Asia. Chinatown was a site of tourism, a “safe terrain in which to spend the extra wartime dollars pouring into West Coast port cities such as Vancouver” (*Paper Shadows* 69). Chinatown had come a long way from the impoverished place of the 1930s, undesirable for tourists. By wartime, Chinatown was known for its “exotic” goods:

The military men who walked through Chinatown were mainly Caucasian sailors and soldiers, tall as giants. The city of Vancouver, with its crowded railway stations and packed harbours, was the last stop before soldiers and sailors shipped out; and the perfumed and powdered ladies from the back rooms of Gastown hotels and bars made Chinatown a favourite place to take shore leave . . . Once, while Mother was negotiating the price of a rare pair of stockings, I remember, a soldier pushed through the busy aisles of Kuo Kong Silk to outbid her. (67)

While tourists flocked to Chinatown for an authentic experience, young Wayson Choy made his own discovery, namely, the cowboys of East Hastings disappearing behind entrances marked “Men Only.” The photograph that illustrates this chapter is of Choy as a boy on a bucking horse—a scene staged for the camera—having fun at the Pacific National Exhibition, waving his hand, a smile planted on his face. Far from presenting a static, romanticized image and memory of Chinatown’s community, the narrative highlights its transformation and flux. This is not the space where he could enjoy the fantasy of an authentic Chinese cultural experience, purely owned by its community members. It shows that the harmonious multicultural society is a myth, as is the precondition of race as an indicator of cultural difference and the idea of Canada as a white nation.

For Choy, the coastal space of Vancouver is a social space, where physical space interacts with symbolic space. Or to put it into Henri Lefebvre’s words, social space “subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their co-existence and simultaneity—their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder” (73). Thus, the coastal

space is an example of such a social space, where the particular location brings its own cultural history. It is not only the mediator of geographical relationships, but also the process of an embodiment of experience. In Choy's case, Chinatown is turned into a new idea, which is negotiated but unsettled, requiring a continual, yet uncomfortable, shift in identities, confronting the space also with a sense of loss. Engaging with the past and integrating it into both Chinatown and his own identity, Choy inspires a theorization of the coastal space by exploring the locality of ethnic history. Choy's writing about Vancouver's Chinatown performs coastal space as ethnic history, and offers a central consideration of generative coastal aesthetics in Canadian literature. Choy has delineated the multiple and dovetailing effects of Vancouver's coastal space on individuals and the community.

In a 1999 interview, Choy explains his intention to write about Vancouver's old Chinatown, and insists that "I want to understand the horrible times my parents and the pioneer generation went through, and why and how they were able to survive at all" (Deer and Choy 1999, 41). Chinatown provides Choy with both a material and a symbolic locus from which to retell the stories of his families and reclaim the histories of Vancouver's Chinatown as a community member and as someone who personally experienced the history and the space. In his study of Choy's novel, Christopher Lee maintains that "Chinese Canadians continued to uphold the family as survival strategy" (Lee 1999, 21). I want to emphasize that Choy's writings create a public consciousness that can be galvanized on behalf of the embattled Chinatown community under the large social and political anti-alterity. As a Chinatown resident, as a survivor of the community going through dark times, and as the child of those Chinatown survivors who went through the discriminatory political act and the social exclusion of the Chinese, Choy guides us into a historical ecosystem, and imagines the possibilities for cultural reconciliation. Choy continues in the interview, "Chinatown was not a community of victims. There were the racist attitudes towards the sexual activities of a people who were told they had no more right to life than animals. They surmounted all of that, those who did survive" (41).

Choy's writing style may be described as anti-epic. There is no single elevated and superior hero-character in his writings. Nor do Choy's real

and imagined characters dominate their environments; they are firmly enmeshed within the contingencies of their surroundings and their heritage. Nor are they assigned to have a teleological destination—they are always evolving and adapting, just as Chinatown itself does over years and decades of family history. Choy's creative works present a sensitive account of his own experience as a Canada-born Chinese Canadian and unfold the various ways of renegotiating one's identities. As Choy says: "one lives one's life in moments, not in the grand sweep of plotline" (41). This fragmentary narration of moments is also a quintessential part of his postmodern style.

Reading Choy's Chinatown does more than illuminate the voyage of Chinese immigration to Canada or Chinese diasporic culture. It takes readers inside the dynamic of Chinese Canadian identity construction, using postmodernist literary devices to do so, confronting us with both the opportunities and limitations of documentary paper evidence. In the process, his work is fundamental to understanding the racialized foundations of both the immigration acts of Canada and Canadian multiculturalism. He grapples with the issues of immigrant family history within the community of Vancouver's Chinatown; at the same time, his works rupture the conventional understanding of the Chinese diaspora and Chinatown culture in Canada. He debunks the stereotype of a victimized minority culture and defies the fetishization of the exotic urban space for the purpose of white consumption; simultaneously he reconstructs the space by using the trope of the coastal landscape—the space between land and sea—to reimagine a cultural integration with the large urban community in Vancouver.

By the time his second memoir *Not Yet: A Memoir of Living and Almost Dying* was published in 2009, Choy had long left Vancouver and made Toronto his habitat. The recent book focuses on his Toronto years and tells the story of the heart and asthma attacks that almost killed him. Vancouver's Chinatown, and his childhood in that community, still linger on in his mind. Waking up in the hospital bed, his physical movements limited, Choy's semiconsciousness returns him to the spatial

wandering through Chinatown. He writes,

All I knew for sure was that I was still in a hospital, caught in a catastrophe, and that someone was standing by me. Yet voices faintly echoed from my past, the nagging warnings of parents and the elders of Chinatown, their fears for my bachelor ways singsonged back into my drugged head like a chorus from an ancient opera. (10)

Chinatown continues to play an essential part in Choy's literary career, and carries significant implications for his own understanding of his past, his self, and his community. Choy's words are telling, as he writes: "my mother and father and the community of Vancouver's Chinatown had nurtured my in-between generation" (138). The voices of parents and elders are still his cultural guide—but also his cultural superego, nagging when he fails to meet the ideal. These voices remind readers of the cross-generational and cross-textual legacy that threads through his entire oeuvre; they remind us of the narrator's relentless efforts at integrating and readapting the cultural fragments of his identity. In this, the arc of Choy's name, Way Sun, and its formidable powers to rehabilitate and restore have come full circle, back to the beginning.

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