

Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood

Wayson Choy

Toronto: Penguin, 1999. 352 pp. \$18.99 paper.

The Chinese in Vancouver: The Pursuit of Identity and Power

Wing Chung Ng

Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999. 256 pp. \$75.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

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IN TWO VERY DIFFERENT BOOKS, authors Wayson Choy and Wing Chung Ng contribute to our understanding of the forces that have shaped the development of ethnic Chinese identities in British Columbia. Recent scholarship on the topic has often focused more on how others imagined Asians rather than on how Asians envisioned themselves. These two authors richly analyze the history of Chinese Canadian identity as seen from the inside. Choy and Ng see Chinese identity in Vancouver as neither a linear path to assimilation over time nor solely as the product of mainstream opinion. Using a wealth of sources, they show how Chinese Canadian identities developed and evolved over time in patterns far more interactive than one might assume.

Both books add new dimensions to a central theme within immigration studies: the conflict among generations of immigrants and their Canadian-born descendants. Ng's *The Chinese in Vancouver* shows how different groups within the Chinese population in Vancouver articulated many different positions about Chinese identity over time. Over thirty-five years, he argues

that Vancouver's Chinese population developed five factions: older pre-1924 immigrants, postwar local-born Chinese, postwar new immigrants, 1970s new immigrants, and 1970s Canadian-born. Each faction was shaped by its unique historical circumstances as well as by its interactions and competition for influence with the others. He studies this conflict among generations by looking at an extensive body of original research data relating to Chinese ethnic organizations, including copious Chinese language sources and interviews with many important community figures.

Ng views Chinese organizations as expressions of identity within a realm that was controlled by Chinese. Though his main interest is in factions that competed to define the proper meaning of Chineseness, he grounds his discussion in histories of institutions and their origins, practices, and internecine competition for cultural power. The result is an ambitious analysis of intra-ethnic conflict covering a broad sweep of time. His vignettes delineate the struggle between immigrants and older immigrants as well as the Canadian-born in the 1950s,

Chinese involvement in the politics of urban renewal in the 1960s, and Chinese engagement in the ethnic politics of Canadian multiculturalism in the 1970s. For each of these eras, he has sketched a partial outline that will help orient future research.

The book's scope necessarily sacrifices depth. There is little coverage of individual group members or leaders, and no individual accounts of identity, which makes for a rather impersonal study. It seems difficult to completely assess the meaning of these groups without paying closer attention to their membership. In addition, women and gender are curiously absent from his discussion, despite women's visible presence in community organizations during this era. Further, the pivotal pre-1945 backdrop to identity politics for both older immigrants and the local-born could use further elaboration. Finally, Ng's focus on Chinese organizations would be strengthened by a more sustained analysis of how identity was linked with political power.

In contrast, Wayson Choy's *Paper Shadows* traces the question of Chinese Canadian identity in the author's own life. Choy's deeply researched, poetic memoir of growing up in Vancouver revisits his early childhood, richly analyzing the personal and collective contours of his life as a young boy in the 1940s and 1950s. The result is an astonishing historical narrative of personal discovery. His poetic style effortlessly weaves sophisticated contextual analyses of the era into an engaging story. Though a memoir, it makes an important contribution to Chinese Canadian history, and it deserves a wide audience, including the general public, children, and Canadian historians.

Paper Shadows opens with Choy's middle-aged discovery of the secret of

his adoption, an event that leads him to recall his childhood in Vancouver. The majority of the book recounts his life from his earliest memories to his departure for Ontario at age eleven. Later in life, he returns to his family members and friends to explore the meaning of his childhood, researching its details and contexts with a more mature understanding. His narration moves seamlessly from the present to his childhood view of past events and to the personal mysteries that, decades later, still haunt him.

Like his previous best-selling book, *The Jade Peony*, *Paper Shadows* joins the specificities of Chinese historical experience in Vancouver with universal childhood themes. In *Paper Shadows*, though, Choy constructs history, not fiction, fusing fact and memory in masterful prose. His use of detail and acknowledgments testify to a meticulously researched past through interviews and archival research. The book ultimately integrates these perspectives in ways he could have never fully understood as a young boy, immersing the reader in a finely crafted portrait of his childhood world of family, friends, and school.

The memoir serves as a rich educational resource, particularly as an account of a son of immigrants. Like other youth of his era, Choy chose to rebel against his parents' attempts to teach him the Chinese language and declared his intention to be "Canadian." Such matters of the heart, he soon discovered, are not so simple. Chinatown, his family, his friends, and his language never truly left him, and so, in *Paper Shadows*, he returns. History too proves to have more mysteries than does a novelist's fiction. In the end, his quest to discover the meaning of his own life and his family's past leaves much to the imagination.

Both Choy's *Paper Shadows* and Ng's *The Chinese in Vancouver* attest to the increasing maturity of Chinese Canadian historical writing. They analyze identity as complex – rooted in time, generation, locale, and interaction with other Chinese and European groups. To sum up, Chinese Canadians

imagined their identities while being engaged in many layers of community interaction. More books like these would continue to build the nascent field of Chinese Canadian history and would also make important contributions to Canadian immigration history.

Ships of Steel, A British Columbia Shipbuilder's Story

T.A. McLaren and Vickie Jensen

Madeira Park, British Columbia: Harbour Publishing. 2000. 288 pp.

Illus. \$39.95 cloth.

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SHIPS OF STEEL tells the story of the careers of two men, William Dick McLaren and his son Thomas Arthur McLaren, and is set within the context of British Columbia's steel shipbuilding industry, from the 1920s through the 1990s. The McLaren story begins in Scotland with the shipbuilding endeavours of W.D. McLaren, which included converting war surplus minesweepers into passenger vessels for the Union Steamship Company. In 1927 McLaren moved to Vancouver and worked as a consulting engineer.

The Second World War created an urgent need for merchant ships, and W.D. McLaren served as manager of the newly established West Coast Shipbuilders. His son Arthur, as a new graduate of UBC's engineering school, joined him. The wartime ships, including

the famous "Park" vessels, were designed for mass production, and, although their construction produced a surge in shipyard activity, it did not prepare the industry for the postwar period. "The experience," notes Arthur McLaren, "was doing the same ship fifty-five times, not building fifty-five different ships" (69). The details of the wartime program are fascinating and well illustrated, but more credit should have been given to the way that H.R. MacMillan and his West Coast cronies stole the march on eastern shipbuilders when establishing a Second World War shipbuilding program.

After the war Arthur McLaren decided, against sound advice, to establish his own shipyard. And, with considerable perseverance and imagination, he succeeded in making it a