

# Isu analysis – the jade peony essay sample

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



One of the themes of the Jade Peony was the difficulty that the early Chinese immigrants had to face when they came to Canada in the late 1800s. Wong Suk is one of the early immigrants, believing there is a “gold mountain” that could make them rich. “There had also been rumours of gold in the rivers that poured down those mountain cliffs, gold that could make a man and his family wealthy overnight.” (pg 17). When he first arrived, he found out the “gold mountain” was only a lie, instead waiting for him is dangerous railroad work, a low-paying job “with only a few dollars left to send back to China every month, and never enough dollars to buy passage home.” (pg 17). He also had to face a racist Canadian government, who “passed the Chinese Exclusion Act and shut down all ordinary bachelor-man traffic between Canada and China, shut off any women from arriving, and divided families.” (pg 17). In those early years Chinatown was populated with males, this reflected the process of men was brought over for labourers and the women were left behind in China.

Wong Suk was unhappy with the government’s treatment and he remarked, “One day they say Old Wong okay-okay. Next day, Wong stinky Chink.” (pg 48). The racism caused the Chinese to resent Canadian culture. Therefore, the elders, Poh Poh and Wong Suk, never gotten use to the Canadian Society, and were unable to accept the Canadian culture. Therefore Chinatown was created, a society that runs like as if it is in China. The Chinese created their own small town over the sea and out in the middle of a strange country, to produce the next generation and to keep alive the Chinese culture and tradition. Even when they passed away, they wish their

bones would be brought back to China. “ Two thousand pounds of bones going home to China... isn't that wonderful?” (pg 64).

Each and every day, migrants from around the world flock to seek refuge in the so-called ' western society.' Life in countries such as the United States and Canada are seen to be a dream; the ' immigrant dream.' It is the pre-notion that life within these countries is one that is driven by happiness, employment and financial security. Once a migrant arrives in the new land, he is automatically faced with the ' immigrant experience.' This being defined as one's encounter with the new land, whether it is prosperous or fruitless. Both novels, *The Jade Peony* by Wayson Choy and *Disappearing Moon Café* by Sky Lee, explore the Chinese immigrant experience in Canada and its effect on individual identity throughout each generation.

Taking a nostalgic look back at Vancouver during the early 1940's, life of a Chinese immigrant was characterized by many social, economic and personal hardships, which can be seen in the novel, *The Jade Peony*. Government legislation and racism prevented the Chinese from achieving economic prosperity while cultural politics and social pressures caused generational conflicts and ultimately a division among generations, between the Chinese immigrant and the Canadian born. Perhaps the greatest challenge faced by Chinese immigrants was that of preserving their native language and culture:

Jook Liang, if you want a place in this world,' Grandmother's voice had that exasperating let-me-remind-you tone, ' do not be born a girls-child.'

‘ This is Canada,’ I wanted to snap back, ‘ not old China.’ (Choy Pg. 31)

Often time, due to the constant clash between cultures, many Chinese immigrants attempted to assimilate into Canadian society. Yet, their culture was the confirmation of their individuality. Similarly, in a 1995 referendum speech, Party Quebecois leader Lucien Bouchard stated that language and culture represented a single being and for this reason cannot be removed. He continued that if Quebec were to sacrifice its language to English, their unique culture would soon follow. In *The Jade Peony*, the ideology of assimilating was the primary cause for the struggle for identity among the characters. The elderly people in the novel resisted changing, fearing a loss of culture and identity. The younger children, growing up and attending school accepted toward the larger social Canadian culture. The old people, Poh Poh and Wong Bak, never integrated into the Canadian Society, and were unable to accept the Canadian culture.

They were deeply devoted to their native country and had to go back to China to die, as indicated by Wong Bak’s parting words, “ bone must come to rest where they most belong”(Choy Pg. 35). Adults such as Father and Stepmother were trying to fit into the new society and were ready to give up their Chinese ways. At the same time, adults like Stepmother easily became a prisoner who was trapped between two cultures. “‘ What does this White Demon want?’ said Stepmother, I could see she wished Suling were here, with her perfect English”(Choy Pg. 140). The younger generations born in Vancouver, like Juk-Liang and Sekky, were willing to become real Canadians.

They hoped to be treated equally as the Canadian children, but even though they were born in Vancouver, they were still considered to be Chinese by other Canadians. The youths were distressed under the pressure of the older adults. The older generation said, “ you do not know Chinese, you are mo yung-useless or mo nos-no brain”(Choy Pg. 135). “ Smart English not Smart Chinese”(Choy Pg. 141) was another derogatory comment young Chinese Canadians had to endure. It was very hard to balance between their original identities and their chosen identities. For example Mrs. Lim asks Sek-Lung:

‘ Who are you Sek-Lung?... Are you tohng yahn?’

‘ Canada!’ I said, thinking of the ten days of school I had attended before the doctor sent me home, remembering how each of those mornings I had saluted the Union Jack, had my hands inspected for cleanliness, and prayed to Father-Art-in-Heaven. But 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. (Choy Pg. 135)

Wayson Choy treats the different outcomes of adaptation within the family from the perspective of the second generation (the children). Thus, the problems of the family often influence the choices made by the second generation. Each of the children embodies different choices and compromises, negotiated not just on their individuality but also on a number of aspects that shape ones identity.

Choy created a life filled with poverty and racism, which ultimately portrays the early Chinese immigrant experience: full of unfulfilled promises and everyday struggles. The promise of wealth and prosperity lured many Chinese to Canada during the late 1800's. In *The Jade Peony*, "Old Golden Mountain" (Choy Pg. 65) symbolizes the 'immigrant dream', which is similar to the theory of the American Dream. Yet, in both cases, the dream and actually achieving it was extremely far-fetched. It was indeed the opposite that immigrants attained. Throughout the course of the novel, one can see that the economic conditions of the Chinese in Vancouver were extremely poor. Chinese children had to wear old clothing and had to feel proud of it.

For example, when Jung-Sum received a second-hand jacket from his uncle Old Yuen as his birthday present, he felt proud of it. At that time Chinese people were unable to afford new jackets. "The second-hand coat from Old Yuen, falling on my twelve-year-old shoulders, felt like armour" (Choy Pg. 93). Children over six, like Kiam and Jung, had to help out the family, either on finance or housework; otherwise, they will be considered mo yung-useless. For many children residing in Vancouver's poverty-stricken China Town, childhood meant nothing but work.