Society, History, and Values: A Cultural Study of Paul Yee's Chinese-Canadian Female Characters

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Résumé: *L'auteur analyse les personnages féminins du romancier Paul Yee dans le contexte de l'émergence du multiculturalisme canadien. Ce dernier parvient, tout d'abord, à créer des personnages de femmes qui échappent au cadre de la société sino-canadienne au caractère patriarcal prononcé; ensuite, grâce à de solides recherches historiques, il met au jour le riche répertoire les mythes canadiens et chinois; enfin, sa connaissance discrète mais approfondie du taoïsme et du confucianisme, et son assimilation des valeurs canadiennes font de ses oeuvres des récits complexes et stimulants.*

Summary: *The paper studies a range of Paul Yee's female protagonists by situating them in the challenging and rewarding social, historical, and cultural context of an increasingly multicultural country — Canada. It argues three main points. First, Yee's solid social or sociological expertise combines well with his creative imagination in portraying female characters who break away from the super-stable, mostly male-dominated or patriarchal Chinese society and family structure; second, a historian turned writer, Yee's rich and first-hand historical knowledge and experience enable him to draw from both Chinese and Canadian histories, myths and mythologies; third, his profound though somewhat hidden philosophical systems express themselves largely in two forms of values: Confucian and Taoist. The interplay between these two, compounded by the third element of Canadian value systems, makes Yee's work sophisticated and thought-provoking.*

From the early stories of *Teach Me to fly, Skyfighter!* to "Prairie Widow," from *The Curses of Third Uncle*, through *Roses Sing on New Snow* (winner of the 1992 Ruth Schwartz Children's Book Award), to *Ghost Train* (winner of the 1996 Governor General's Award for Children's Literature), characters

like Sharon Fong, Gum-may Yee, Lillian Chong, Maylin Cheung, and Choon-yi, all leave readers with an indelible and vivid memory of their personalities and actions. In addition to being suffused with the strong presence of female characters, these works teach and inculcate a certain Chinese system of values and explore their multiple implications in the New World.[1] Hence, the immediate focus of this study is not purely literary; it is cultural. We examine Yee's strategies of centring on and foregrounding Chinese-Canadian women, traditionally the persistently, ruthlessly marginalized and trivialized "second sex" (de Beauvoir) in Chinese society. Chief among the strategies is Yee's tactic of bursting Chinese-Canadian ghettoization by placing his heroines in a socially and culturally mixed and challenging milieu, rather than isolating them from intercultural exchange and communication. Also significant is Yee's cultural interpretation and historicization of women, in which he links them closely to the rich Chinese cultural heritage and studies female subjectivity in relation to women's historical role.

Furthermore, the integration into Canadian society coincides with the adoption of relatively progressive or individualist Canadian values; it entails, simultaneously, the questioning and modification of Confucian ethical codes and moral norms (e.g., filial piety or rituals), some of which denigrate and oppress women. On the other hand, the individualist tenets and practices of Taoism or Chinese Buddhism remain basically unchallenged. In Yee's fictional world, these forces — social, historical, cultural, ethical, and spiritual — shape his heroines' identities in diverse and complex ways. All of his strong heroines succeed, to varying degrees, in absorbing the best the two cultures have to offer; they particularly reject the debilitating and inhibiting elements of the Chinese culture.

I. The Individual and Social Milieu

To understand the identity formation of Yee's female characters, one must first come to grips with the familial and social relations in Chinese society. When Chinese immigrants settle down in Canada, particularly in Yee's Chinatown, they gradually re-establish or re-produce the same order and structure that has been entrenched for generations in the homeland. This repetitive scheme is characterized by two key features: it is not only strictly hierarchical but also ferociously patriarchal or misogynist (Overmyer 91-2). One should also note the Confucian vision at work here: Chinese society is structured like the family. The ruler is to his subjects what the father is to the son: the former takes care of the latter, but at the same time commands absolute obedience. The hierarchy includes every member of society, and women are at the very bottom. If the latter are not stunted, they grow up, paradoxically, with doubled strength. We submit that Yee offers an authentic representation of traditional Chinese human relations transplanted to Canada. He refuses to allow his female characters to be swallowed by tradition. Both

the Canadian environment and his heroines' inner resources contribute to their difficult but stubborn growth.

With a clear understanding of the Chinese vision of social relations, Yee's characterization of girls and women is typically concerned with the Chinese experience in Canada. His women mature not within the narrow confines of a mere Chinese household, nor even within the small Chinese community. They go beyond these two arenas and enter into the larger tapestry of Canadian culture. A good example of this is Sharon, the third generation Chinese-Canadian in *Teach me to Fly*. Her contacts with Christine Thomas, a white female "soccer star," function to make her question the traditional role women play in the Chinese view, a role expressed through Samson, the new immigrant from Hong Kong. It is here that she earns the right to say loudly that "they [women] can so!" (92). The same is true of Lillian in *The Curses of Third Uncle*. In the absence of her father, she has to fight her exceedingly misogynist and bullying Third Uncle's attempt to send all women of the Chong family — her mother, herself, and two other girls — back to China. Yee makes it clear that when Lillian first fails to find work after a door-to-door search in Chinatown, she is rescued by Mrs. Bell, a white woman who employs her as a housemaid. The job legitimately transfers her from the tight Chinese family and community to a new, comparatively more open environment; further, it provides her with an opportunity to look for her father, who is secretly collecting funds for Dr. Sun's revolution. Here, the influence and help from the white people are crucial. The adult story, "Prairie Widow," goes the farthest in resisting the attraction of Chinatown in Vancouver. Wilfully defying her cousin's denigrating remark — "You are a woman, do you know that?" (7), Gum-may Yee, Gordon's widow, decides after intense inner struggle to stay in the prairies, where there are but few Chinese. All of these female characters manage to walk away from the Chinese families or, even more, the Chinese ghettos; they begin to integrate into the white culture. It is the Chinese family, and its concomitant male chauvinist attitude, that push the Chinese women towards an adoption of the less blatantly misogynist Canadian values and practices.[2]

This does not mean that Yee paints an altogether rosy picture of intercultural mixing and integration in Canada. If the Chinese girl or woman fails to resist or oppose the strong father figure within the family, or a patriarch of an association of Chinese immigrants, tragedy inevitably results. There are certainly cases in which the white culture or people do not penetrate the Chinese one. "Forbidden Fruit" records unsentimentally Farmer Fong's strangulation of his daughter's love for farmhand Johnson. The isolation on the prairie and the lack of an influential Canadian community both contribute to her meekness and submission. It is true that in "Sons and Daughters," the upstart Merchant Moy is fearful of condemnation from the Canadian-Chinese; but, he manages to go back to China, secretly exchange his twin daughters born in Canada for twin boys, and bring the latter back to

Vancouver's Chinatown as heirs to his business. His wife can do nothing but wail inwardly. Merchant Moy's return to China amounts to a return to its patriarchal values and misogynist practices: only there can he fulfil his wish for sons to carry on the family name. Yee seems to suggest that it is through sufficient interracial contacts that the Chinese system of male-centred values can be challenged. If Chinese-Canadian women remain forever within the boundaries of the Chinese family, the majority will find it difficult to succeed in their efforts to escape that system.

Yee's most stunning orchestration of scenarios certainly resides in a sudden public exhibition of the talents and abilities of his female characters. It usually begins with a denial of female ability, or simply a robbing of opportunities for women to display their abilities in the public domain. They are shut up in the house, or else silenced by a strong male voice, as evidenced in Sharon's elder brother, Lillian's Third Uncle, or in Maylin's restaurant-owner father. Before this disclosure, not even the heroine's most intimate family members realize or recognize her worth or value, not to mention others outside of the family. In "Teach me to Fly, Skyfighter!", Sharon is constantly annoyed not only by Samson, her foil, but also Eddy, her brother; their sneering and disparaging remarks invariably reek of young male chauvinism. Yet Yee devises the final scene of flying a kite to display her exquisite skill to all kite watchers at Kitsilano Park.

Similarly, in *Roses Sing on New Snow*, the father's attempt to shut his daughter behind kitchen doors fails utterly, though he tries every means to ensure his two sons' usurpation of the glory that rightfully belongs to the daughter ,Maylin. The recognition of the latter's talent comes with full force when the visiting Chinese Governor unwittingly allows the girl to display her surpassing Roses Sing on New Snow to every admiring eye. To send the message, Yee has Maylin declare to the Governor: "This is a dish of the New World. You cannot recreate it in the old" (23). Here, Yee's culturally synthetic hand is again at work. The dish is an apt metaphor: the public demonstration of her inimitable skill not only openly proves her unique talent, but also forcefully argues that the Canadian experience is an indispensable ingredient in the Chinese immigrants' process of assimilation.

In *The Curses of Third Uncle*, Yee's most developed novel featuring female protagonists to date, the acknowledgement and affirmation of the heroine's talents and militant strategies reaches its maximum degree. The Chinese community, Chinatown, and very probably through Dr. Sun, the whole of China, may come to know Lillian's name for her courageous deeds. Given the peculiarity of Chinese social and cultural structures, it is only those men in charge who grant, as it were, public recognition of women's role. No women are in positions powerful enough to take on that function. The swift recognition of her worth is made possible by the very agency that denies it. Since the Chinese are family and community-oriented, they are

more likely to realize her role through constant and even interfering communal activities than, say, through the more individualistic activities characteristic of the white community.

One can draw two conclusions about Yee's fiction in terms of social relations and literary representation. First, the traditional Chinese family or community is indeed a super-stable social structure in which order and norms are largely fixed. It gives protection, stability, and prosperity to the Chinese family and the Chinese-Canadian neighbourhood; but, it also hierarchizes people and marginalizes women, with the result that women reside at the very bottom of society and are exploited and oppressed. However, the same community may, under certain circumstances, offer opportunities for women to show their talent to full public view almost instantly, simply because of the tightly related and inner-looking social structure. The revealing process in Yee's fiction is therefore entirely natural, logical and culturally authentic. In the cases of Lillian and Maylin in particular, Yee's female protagonists burst open any familial and communal enclosures and literally bask in the glory of personal achievements. Thrown in doubt is the entrenched traditional Chinese assumption that men are unquestionably superior to women.

Also, Yee's fictional characters are deeply rooted in specific social conditions. That Chinese Canadian women have been marginalized, exploited, and oppressed in patriarchal social and familial structures is a proven fact, well documented and vividly dramatized in biographies and historical books such as the award-winning *The Concubine's Children* by Denise Chong, *Gin Guo: Voices of Chinese Canadian Women* by the Canadian Chinese Women's Collective, and more recently, Lily Chow's *Sojourners in the North*. What makes Yee's work so unique then, are the parallels he draws between his literary prototypes and social reality. It is not surprising that in a recent interview, Yee confirms the vital role his deceased aunt played in his upbringing and stresses the need to "immortalize" her ("A Sense of Realism") and women like her. In this act of relating the social to the literary, Paul Yee joins the company of Yip Yuen Chung[3] and SKY Lee, both in criticizing and in hoping to correct the ills of traditional Chinese Canadian society and its attendant patriarchal structure and misogynist attitudes; furthermore, as a creative writer, he offers the readers a salutary dose of realism against mainstream writers who indulge in postmodernism. Like most writers of colour, Yee sticks to and excels at social realism. A sense of social mission is palpable.

II. History and/or Her Story

In rethinking women's roles, Yee also fully appropriates useful Chinese stories, tales, legends, and historical data to reinforce the Chinese connection. In a culture that respects old age and wisdom, often an elderly and far-

sighted man serves as an educational agent instead of the heroine's father. These stories assume a particular importance when the heroines cannot afford to go to school, either English or Chinese. In *The Curse*, Blind-Eye narrates the story of the heroic building of the Great Wall to cultivate Lillian's feeling for things Chinese, whereas Cariboo Wing reels off the history of modern Chinese revolutions to help Lillian appreciate her father's selflessness and courage. In both cases, a necessary amount of information is given to the inquisitive Lillian; it links her intimately to the past of China. Similarly, in the title story of *Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter*, it is chiefly by word-of-mouth that Sharon comes to know the distant land called China. Dai-bah is Skyfighter's intimate Cantonese name used by his juniors such as Sharon; his inspiring stories about his hobby and bachelor years in Canada, marked by homesickness and isolation, not only links Canada to China, but also fire Sharon's young imagination to attempt what is considered by many impossible. Only after his storytelling does Sharon come to a true and private understanding of the idiosyncratic old man and the ritualistic, symbolic meaning of kite flying in Chinese folk tradition: the rare moments of his joy and transportation away from his unbearable bachelor life in Canada are sanctified in the oral narrative act. It is apt, then, that Yee allows Sharon to experience vicariously, if only temporarily, a similar feeling (26) to make her an organic part of the Chinese culture. The genuine pathos of sympathy and empathy draws the readers deeply into the cultural and psychological reasons behind the mere physical act of flying a kite.

In presenting female characters' due claim to courage and wisdom, Yee often gives an ironic twist to traditional Chinese legends or tales about the practices of men in power. In a manner reminiscent of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Yee re-places the ex-centric — "the mother at the center," to quote Kristeva from *About Chinese Women* (45) — back to the position of command. According to one version of Chinese history, there had been what Frederick Engels has called a "matriarchy" (35). And Yee's solid historical background serves his fictional intent well: it is precisely at the moment of hesitation and decision that the songs about the ancient and valiant Yang Family women keep ringing in Lillian's ears, urging her to make up her mind:

> Their blades engaged, sparks were dispatched,
> They thrust and parried, their strength was matched.
> The mother gained the upper hand,
> Victory was hers, better than planned.
> Then she saw fire in her son's bright eyes
> And let him win, to join their lines. (*The Curses* 56)

If in ancient times young males had to await female commanders' permission to take part in a war, Lillian is encouraged and inspired to emulate

them. But to show her worth, she must take the first step. When she bursts out "I'm not a baby. I'm going" (56), she actually breaks away from the stereotypes of women being meek and subordinate that developed only later in Chinese history. Lillian's act is symbolic. By extension, Yee suggests that all women can achieve the same. Lillian's decision is important in yet another sense. When she resolves to leave home — the "domestic circle" (Buss 1) to which Chinese women are traditionally confined — she enters into the public domain and even into the political arena. Yet she proves her strength by exhibiting courage, perseverance, and wisdom. Both the public fund-raising and the identity and security of Chinese-Canadian contributors hinge largely upon her efforts. According to Yee, though the Chinese tradition is marred by the slighting of women's ability in the Confucian concepts of filial piety and duty, it also provides an element that can be re-used to support women's causes and liberation.

Yee capitalizes on his own solid knowledge of Chinese history and on his informed notions of revolution;[4] the combination of these two elements produces at once a historically believable, realistic female figure in Lillian, and an idealist in the revolutionary sense. Unlike most Western literature where young adults come to terms with growing pains and sexual awakening on a physical and individual psychological level, Yee's Lillian is unique. The revolutionary impulse behind her father's plan to subvert what was the seemingly formidable great Manchurian (Qing) empire can only be an encouragement for Lillian to adopt a strong life purpose. Thus Lillian's realization of her individual worth coincides nicely with the progression of the revolutionary movement. There is, in the portrayal of Lillian, a touch of romanticism, to be sure, but the depiction obtains its credibility at the particular moment of history, a moment that ennobles Lillian, and by extension, all Chinese devoted to the historically necessary revolution. The change of personal life, especially that of women at the bottom of society, is connected organically with the fate of overseas Chinese (in relation to other Canadians) and with the destiny of the Chinese nation as a whole (in relation to other foreign powers and the Manchus). Any separation of these issues would have rendered Lillian a flat, traditional figure intent primarily upon personal growth. Since the story about a young female adult is inextricably connected with the Chinese history of modern revolution, and since the imminent political revolution has as its prerequisite the liberation of women, Yee's valiant acts of crossing personal and public, or private and political, boundaries belie a Chinese belief in the holistic relation between the individual and society, as much as that between the individual and history.

To suggest the rich combinations discussed above does not mean that Yee is a social realist or serious historian through and through and nothing else. Yee is versatile. He has also proven himself capable of blending the realistic, historically grounded with the surreal, magical, and fantastic. And nowhere is this ability more evident than in his most recent award-

winning *Ghost Train*. Here as elsewhere, history re-enters his story — or rather, her story: a female painter's story. But this concrete historical referent is buttressed and embellished by the wide — and perhaps wild — imagination Yee intends to fire in his young readers. Under Yee's powerful pen, a fourteen-year-old girl named Choon-yi is brought to life, and she effectively serves the function of immortalizing the Chinese labourers — albeit largely male — working on and dying for the CPR.

Thus, while verifiable social history figures in all of Yee's fiction, at the center of *Ghost Train* also lie three tales traceable to Chinese literature, legends, and mythology: the Taoist story about Chuang Tzu wondering if he is a butterfly that is dreaming he is human or vice versa, after waking up from a dream; another tale calling for a new angle on physically challenged people; and yet another titled "The Magic Brush of Ma Liang." However, Yee re-invents these legends and myths with an adolescent female as the unquestionable protagonist. Though born with only one arm, she is blessed with the gift of painting remarkably vivid and lifelike pictures that wins her admiration. Answering the call of her father, she arrives in North America only to find him dead — or buried alive — barely a week ago: "Many men died building this railway," Ba said. "All along the route, bodies have been swept away by the river or buried under a landslide. Their bones will never be recovered. But the time has come to transport their souls home" (*Ghost Train* 11). In Yee's imagined world, it is through her magical brush that the Chinese labourers are resurrected — if only for brief moments; and it takes the female artist's own experience riding on the ghost train in her dream to endow her with the powers to reinscribe the Chinese workers' heroic deeds and therefore enshrine them in her paintings.

In Yee's miraculous vision, then, the past resides in the present, the dead are revived, history enters her story and painting, and this world is connected to the other world. It is only natural that the father praises Choon-yi thus: "'Daughter, you have done well,' Ba said, 'Now roll up the painting and take it home to China. Then climb the highest hill in the region and burn it. Let our ashes sail on the four winds. That way our souls will finally find their way home'" (Ghost *Train* 15). There is little doubt that the heroine will complete her task, as advised by her ghostly father in a moment reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In this way, the blending and blurring of history, mythology, dreams, and reality assist Yee in his re-inscription and momumentalizing of the Chinese labourers, who, until very recently, have been the unsung heroes in mainstream history books. Yee has demonstrated adeptness in dealing with both: the social and the literary; the imaginative and the historical. And the fact that he creates a female painter to perform the same duties speaks volumes for his due trust in the practical abilities and magical powers of women.

III. The Chinese System of Values: Confucian and Taoist

Yee is also a complex culturalist who rethinks traditional Chinese values in the context of the New World. Though he usually does not specify the system of values in his works, some underlying assumptions and virtues are traceable to either the Confucian or the Taoist ethical and philosophical traditions. In general, Yee seems to endorse some Confucian tenets or ethical codes and to negate others. Meanwhile, he valorizes in principle the Taoist virtues. What is of special note is the Chinese-Canadian family in which predominantly Confucian values are instilled. In particular, "the School" that Louis Althusser (81-82) so heavily stresses has little function in the moulding of Yee's female characters' moral being or personality. It is the Chinese parents or uncles and aunts who provide the necessary values in their children's formative years. Here, Yee clearly endorses the Confucian ethics of diligence and duty, the demands on everyone to attain sagehood and to reach perfection, and the emphasis on education. At the same time, Yee subverts the misogynist attitudes and patriarchal values, though he betrays certain ambivalent feelings about the notion of filial piety.

By vigorously challenging the age-old Confucian patriarchal value system, which puts a premium on sons to carry on the family name and possibly its glory and to make fame for the clan, Yee creates female characters who prove to be as capable as, if not more so than, their male counterparts. In "Sons and Daughters," despite the father's attempt to dispose of his twin daughters, the book concludes with the daughters as virtual inheritors of the Moy business; *Roses Sing on New Snow* features Maylin as the unmatched chef of the Cheung restaurant, with the two lazy sons left to public ridicule and ignominy. In particular, Yee emphasizes the Canadian social milieu and the value system of the New World, though the latter is often presented in a most diffused or diluted form. There is a discernable attempt to compensate for the lack of equitable treatment of female characters. One need only look at Yee's "Prairie Night 1939" to appreciate the insuperable difficulty in overcoming the traditional Chinese mentality. It is not that Gordon fails to realize the rather misogynist contempt for baby girls; his agony arises and is made all the more poignant because his mother unconsciously upholds patriarchal dictates for sons and implores him to return to China. Therefore, it is understandable that he capitulates to the dictates of conventional Chinese values and carries out his obligation to his family in China by giving up his restaurant, an enterprise of years of hard work. The return to China (as in Gordon's case) implies an homage to old Chinese values. The stay in Canada, of course, does not by itself mean a wholesale acceptance of Canadian values; but, the comparison of these two systems made by Yee with respect to women seems to favour the Canadian experiences. Though Julia Kristeva has been criticized for her methodology

and orientalism, her description of Confucius as the "Eater of Women" may be accurate regarding Yee's views on women.[5]

If Yee refrains from specifying a certain philosophy of life for fear of spoiling the entertainment value in some of his juvenile or young adult fiction, he is more explicit in "The Prairie Widow," which is meant for adults. The mother, a thinly-disguised figure of Yee's close relative,[6] contemplates the idea of moving away from the spiritually sterile and culturally conformist environment in Saskatchewan in the same manner that the mother of Mencius, the second master in the Confucian genealogy, makes a strategic relocation so that her son can become a scholar rather than a "butcher" (10). But Yee does not grant a full endorsement of Confucian tenets in the New World. The mother finds her husband wanting in spontaneous love for his children's legitimate fondness of fun and play. In a series of interior monologues signifying the lack of communication between husband and wife, she cannot but come to the sad conclusion that "Gordon played the cold hard father of Confucian virtue and the boys only became another topic of argument" (16). Here, the two most important Confucian masters appear in a cluster, but they are both cast in negative images. Gum-may's ironic interpretation of the well-known story of Mencius's mother gives her the ideological strength to stay among the whites, while the austere figure of a Confucian father is blamed for the dullness and loneliness of her life and that of her children on the prairies.

Any act of subversion necessitates another of affirmation, and Yee cannot help reasserting other Confucian virtues. This point is well-made by the character of Chris Thomas, a white girl, who says: "sometimes it was easy to see that the Asian [Chinese-Canadian] kids were a lot of things that she wasn't — hard-working, obedient, and well-mannered" ("Strathcona Soccer Star" *Teach* 99). The paramount emphasis on education has been considered by quite a few to be the most important factor underlying the phenomenal economic success of countries like Japan and Hong Kong, and the academic achievements of Asian students in North American universities (Duke 39; Overmyer 15). Yee's fiction advocates the same principle. Thus, in "Who Set the Fire," Samson's mother worries ceaselessly about her son's grades and nags him into striving for the best marks. A few characteristic lines are relevant here: "One day, he [Samson] brought home a test paper on which he had scored one hundred percent. His mother nodded approvingly ..." (44). From her point of view, Samson cannot be merely as good as the white boys: he has to be better. Samson's mother, in fact, resembles Evelyn Lau's in *Runaway* and Amy Tan's in "Two Kinds." The three mothers all exact the highest performance from their son and daughter. Ironically, in Lau's case, maternal demand becomes an anathema that drives her away from an overprotective home despite her eighty-nine percent, "an imperfect mark" (2). However, in Tan's hand, Jing-mei eventually realizes, some fifteen years later, her then deceased mother's Confucian code and comes to appreciate it.

By contrast, Yee definitely subscribes to this Confucian imperative by having his characters follow their parents' advice to do well in school.

Evident in Samson's mother's mentality and in Sharon's characterization is yet another Confucian virtue — perfectionism, for Confucian tenor teaches that everyone can be a sage, if one not only works hard but also cultivates an all-round personality (Schirokauer 31-32; 41-42). Again, this is seen from Chris's perspective: "She tended to see Sharon as a "good" Chinese kid whose marks and appearance were almost always perfect. Chris, on the other hand, was regarded by most of her teachers as a problem student ("Strathcona Soccer Star" *Teach Me* 96). In Chris's eyes, not only does her Chinese-Canadian friend excel in study, but she is also impeccable in appearance and irreproachable in behaviour. Granted that a touch of idealization may mar Chris's judgement, the ideals or models Yee wishes to establish for emulation are transparent. The Confucian perfectionist norms in academic grades and social conduct turn out to be Yee's standards. Though he questions and rejects some Confucian values, Yee also preserves the reusable ones.

If the Confucian teachings have a great deal to do with social and interpersonal relations, Taoism emphasizes individualist and naturalist qualities such as intuition, spontaneity, personal practice and enlightenment, and even achievements of a magical or mystical sort. The combination of childlike innocence and simplicity with the most delicate and sophisticated techniques and skills produces female characters who are solidly grounded in real-life situations, but who are also capable of spiritual heights. In this Taoist paradigm, no preconceptions, no limits, no stereotypes are put before Yee's female characters' fulfilment of potentials.

One of the main Taoist tenets states that skills and perfection come naturally from constant practice and empirical experience, not from any prescribed gender roles.[7] Yee's delineation of female characters benefits from this tenet. He especially fosters female courage to break new ground, to cross conventional gender boundaries of what a boy or a girl should do. "Strathcona Soccer Stars" features Sharon and Chris who strive to prove to the boys that girls "can" (92) play soccer as well as boys. The girls succeed in their endeavour, not through sheer chance or tactics, but through much practice involving pain and sweat. More significantly, Yee has the two girls outstrip in soccer the very three boys who have scorned them.

Roses Sing on New Snow, Yee's most recent publication before his Governor General's Literary Award winner, *Ghost Train* (1996), reverses traditional Chinese gender roles (e.g., male chef) by portraying Maylin who distinguishes herself in cooking. Under Yee's pen, there is a pervasive Taoist mystical sense of the ineffable and unteachable in her culinary art that defies repeated male imitation. It goes without saying that the two lazy sons fail to reproduce their sister's particular dish that shares the name of the book;

even the reputedly wise Chinese Governor visiting Canada is deeply baffled by the fact that, though cooking side by side with the heroine, Maylin and he yield two dishes of widely different tastes. Here, one is indeed tempted to submit that Yee implies that certain female experience or wisdom is inaccessible or unteachable to males.

Yee also employs, to powerful effect, traditional Taoist or Chinese-Buddhist practices not only to strengthen the ties to the Chinese culture, but also to refashion the image of women. Particularly elaborate is the description of hay-gung (Cantonese pronunciation; Chi Kung in Wade-Giles and Qigong in Mandarin or *pinyin*; 86-88). In "Never Be Afraid," boys like John Chin are keen on the Chinese martial art, kung-fu, made tremendously popular by Bruce Lee in the 1970s and by Jackie Chan twenty years later, to build up self-defence techniques; however, in *The Curses of Third Uncle*, Lillian's acquisition of hay-gung serves altruistic, life-saving, and spiritual purposes (115-116). So, in Yee's scheme of things it is the Chinese medical or even mystical practices that save the old man and heal the mother. There is little reliance on Western medicine, for no apparent reason. Indeed, the wonderfully therapeutic functions of hay-gung go hand in hand with Lillian's nurturing and nursing function. It would be less appropriate, so we think, if Yee allows Caribou Wing to teach the devastating technique of kung-fu to Lillian, instead of hay-gung (Chi Kung in Wade-Giles), a preventive and curative art that is now gaining wide currency in North America and Europe.

But Yee's list of women's skills does not stop here; it includes techniques or skills traditionally considered masculine. By jettisoning the Chinese foot fetishism, together with its accompanying image of foot-binding practice that reduces women to toddlers for life, Yee, in a broad stroke, depicts at least one woman, Yimen, who can "fly" (73-74; the act of jumping over a long distance effortlessly or walking on little support in mid-air), so to speak. In fact, there is more to the physical skill, for the image of flying recurs consistently and becomes a symbol. In Sharon's kite-flying episode, readers feel her desire to soar high and to see China from Canada, just like Skyfighter. The youthful imagination knows neither geographical nor spatial bounds.

The Curses brings to a climax the spiritual dimension of the Taoist or Chinese-Buddhist exercises and training techniques, a dimension that comes through in a simple but convincing manner. Take, for example, the following few lines on the possibility of flying from Dr. Sun Yatsun: "I've heard of those [sword] stories, too.... And I believe them. If the heart's in the right place and the body is trained, you can soar to any height you want!" (139). Here, readers do not encounter any moral preaching, nor abstract intellectualization. Dr. Sun, the "greatest man of our [Chinese] country," as F.P. Grove's translation puts it (57), teaches the young daughter of revolution a fundamental truth couched in accessible metaphorical language.[8] Characteristic of a revolutionary, Dr. Sun sets no limits on the ability a mere chip of a girl like Lillian

can realize. Like John Chin in "Never Be Afraid," Dr. Sun must have realized that in ancient China, men and women alike trained from childhood to become the fittest and fastest human beings on earth (73). In *Teach me* as in *The Curses*, the metaphorical use of women's flying, the supreme Taoist goal with its archetype in Zhuang Zi's "Let Fancy Roam," suggests that nothing is intrinsically gender-bound.[9] Women are as capable as men of achieving anything. By evoking the figure of Dr. Sun and the flying technique, Yee has created a convincing female character that treasures her own individual development and endeavours to change the fate of the Chinese community and that of the Chinese nation.

In sum, Yee's Taoist wisdom as expressed in his creative work teaches not only the spirit of self-reliance, independence, and individual heroism, but also stresses the importance of basic and practical skills (such as sewing, cooking, and taking care of the younger ones in *The Curses*). Not only can one find superb and magical painting skills — sometimes considered the realm of females — in Choon-yi, his other female characters are also skilled in sports and martial arts that used to be the exclusive trades of men: indeed, they are able to "perform whatever men can" and "hold up half the sky," to quote Mao Tze-Tung. Thus, Yee opens up entirely new vistas for his readers, particularly female, to strive for.[10]

Conclusion

To conclude, Paul Yee's fictional universe is culturally rich and complex. With a heavy focus on girls and women, he looks searchingly into the underlying structures of Chinese-Canadian family and society. At a time when postmodernism and poststructuralism were in vogue in mainstream Canadian literature and culture, he went against the grain and grounded his characters firmly in society and historical time to give them authenticity and solidity. By doing this, he champions the social realist or neo-realist mode of writing that has been faithfully followed by emergent and prizewinning Chinese Canadian writers such as SKY Lee, Wayson Choy, and Larissa Lai. But his works such as *The Curses of the Third Uncle*, *Tales from Gold Mountain*, and more recently, *Ghost Train*, have also shown his superb skill at intermingling the real with the surreal, the historical and social with the magical and mythical, thus transcending limited/limiting time and space boundaries, while, paradoxically, anchoring his characters solidly in palpable real life.

Furthermore, he examines critically the basic moral and spiritual codes native to the Chinese culture — Confucianism and Taoism. The tightly-knit Chinese community and its sense of cultural unity, epitomized by the image of Chinatown, is viewed with ambivalence. For Yee's characters, to leave it forever and never to return appears too radical a break with the Chinese culture. The Chinese family, along with its protection, warmth, help, and indispensable role in moral cultivation and in Confucian all-round per-

sonality development, is treated positively more often than not, though some undesirable elements are identified.

Seriously questioned and rejected are the Confucian patriarchal prejudices and practices, such as the obsession with male offspring continuing the family line and, related to this, the misogynist attitude that women are to be relegated to the margins of the family and society by the mere fact of their being women.[11] In this sense, Yee's work anticipated many of the themes and topics explored by established and emergent Chinese Canadian women writers such as SKY Lee, Evelyn Lau, Denise Chong, Lydia Kwa, Larissa Lai, Yan Li, and Lily Chow in the past decade.

However, Yee confirms Confucian virtues such as frugality, modesty, respect for the old, duty, diligence, and altruism. Strongly asserted is the prerogative for Chinese-Canadian women not to sacrifice their time and energy for patriarchal purposes and reasons. The emphasis on education as having primary importance is maintained throughout, as is the possession of an all-round personality, or attainment of perfection.

On the other hand, Yee maintains the Taoist stress on intuition, instinct, spontaneity, and flexibility of attitudes; he also treasures practical skills, as much as he does the spirit of independence and individuality. This love for the Taoist tenets is not gratuitous. The Canadian environment, as represented in Yee's fiction, allows plenty of room for their practice; several of the Confucian teachings, by comparison, are not so blessed.

Notes

1 We wish to thank Paul Yee amply for providing timely and invaluable information on his purpose of writing as "to instruct children and to provide them with a mirror of themselves and the world they know" ("Questionnaire," Sept. 20, 1993). To the question "do you consider yourself to be a feminist sympathizer, or supporter of women's cause," his answer is a definite "Yes."

In our paper we have come up with some conclusions with which Yee may not be in total agreement. For this, see W.H. New's Editorial (6) on multiple interpretations. We also believe that Yee's works, along with those of Evelyn Lau, SKY Lee, Larissa Lai, Wayson Choy, and many other writings featured in *Many-Mouthed Birds: Contemporary Writing by Chinese Canadians*, have partially invalidated Sheng-tai Chang's note about the dearth of Chinese-Canadian writing in his introduction to *The Tears of the Chinese Immigrants* (1990). However, critical in-depth studies on Chinese-Canadian writers are virtually nonexistent; our research yields only some reviews or introductions by Bennett Lee, Christine Dewar, Annette Goldsmith, Gernot Wieland, and Raymond E. Jones (see Works Cited for full information). But a work, *Towards a Poetics of Chinese Canadian Writing* is presently being revised for publication with the University of Victoria.

2 Paul Yee repeatedly employs "white" or "whites" to refer to Canadians as a monolithic or homogeneous group, without specifying their nationalities.

3 See Sheng-Tai Chang's "Literary Realism and Social Idealism," and the Introduction to his translation of Yip's work, based on this article.

4 See Anthony Chan's review in *Canadian Ethnic Studies*; see also Yee's *Saltwater City* in conjunction with Peter Lee's essay for Yee's sense of history. Yee's irresistible urge to instill values and shape character is evident in his frequent declarations of intentions. See "Afterword" in *Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter!* (122-133); "Author's Statements" after "Prairie Widow" (136); and "Afterword" in *Tales from Gold Mountain* (63-64); Geoff Hancock's interview with Yee in *Other Solitudes* (1990); and an interview with John (Zhong) Ming Chen, in *Major Voices from the Minority/Margins*.

5 See Gayatri Spivak's "French Feminism in the International Frame"; see also Ray Chow's *Women and Chinese Modernity* on Kristeva; see John M. Chen's papers, "Malcolm Lowry and the Tao", and "Theorizing About New Modes of Representation," on Spivak, Chow, and Kristeva in *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 20.3 (Sept. 1993) and 21. 1 (June 1994).

6 We are grateful to Jim Wong-chu, Paul Yee's friend, for sharing this biographical information about the story.

7 For some sense of the Taoist mystical experience, see *Zhuang Zi* (either A.C. Graham or Shi Jinchao) on the cook cutting up a cow and on the wheelwright; see John M. Chen's essay, "'The Voyage that Never Ends': Malcolm Lowry's Taoist Aesthetics of Return/Reversal" (forthcoming in Euro-Sinica Series edited by Adrian Hsia).

8 See C.T. Hsia's book (1980: 30) on stories of swordsmen marked by great individual heroism and their tremendous popularity with the Chinese people.

9 See *Zhuang Zi*, first chapter, on flying and human imagination.

10 SKY Lee quotes Mao Tzu-Tung, too, on guerrilla warfare, in her "Women in Touch with Coming Home" in *Telling it*. Yee's glorification of such deeds may be slightly overdone; one Canadian review by Raymond E. Jones finds it incredible that she can go independently to Revelstoke.

11 See Hsia's book (105-106; 340-341) on the same phenomenon in Chinese literature.

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