

Oriental stereotypes in Canadian picture books

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Résumé: Dans cet article sévère et rigoureux, Diana Shklanka évalue la présence de stéréotypes culturels dans huit albums illustrés mettant en scène des personnages orientaux. Elle en conclut que, malgré les efforts évidents des auteurs et illustrateurs, les orientaux sont le plus souvent présentés comme des êtres passifs, grégaires, étrangement identiques dans leurs caractéristiques physiques.

In the 1970's The Council on Interracial Books for Children sponsored a study of children's books on Asian-American themes; the reviewers concluded "that, with one or perhaps two exceptions, the 66 books are racist, sexist and elitist, and that the image of Asian Americans they present is grossly misleading."¹ Canadian picturebooks today, while not as blatantly racist and sexist, are still open to charges of stereotyping and misrepresentation. Books in which the central characters are Chinese or Japanese are so uncommon, however, that any examples are lavishly praised and promoted, often before being critically evaluated. It is relatively easy to assess the accuracy of background details in such books; it is more difficult to gauge the extent of racial and sexual stereotyping and to decide whether the stereotypes are unjustifiable exaggerations or accurate reflections of historical and cultural realities. The best books individualize the main characters and thus avoid the stereotypes; they depict characters with whom children may identify imaginatively; they recreate experiences, fictional or recollected, that are convincingly authentic; and they are marked by aesthetic excellence.²

Of the eight Canadian picture books which focus on Chinese and Japanese experiences, four are memoirs rather than stories. John Lim's *At grandmother's house* and *Merchants of the mysterious east*, Sing Lim's *West coast Chinese boy*, and Shizuye Takashima's *A child in prison camp* recall the author-illustrator's childhood experiences. Shelley Tanaka's *Michi's New Year* illustrated by Ron Berg, Adelle LaRouche's *Binky and the bamboo brush*, and Ian Wallace's *Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance* are fictionalized narratives. Paul Yee's *Tales from Gold Mountain* illustrated by Simon Ng is less easily categorized, for it combines fantasy and realism, folktale and history.

In both text and illustrations, all the books provide information about Chinese or Japanese culture, but the four books of recollections do so best. The

primary aim of each memoir seems to be to communicate not only facts but also impressions of a past way of life. In his companion books, *At grandmother's house* and *Merchants of the mysterious east*, John Lim recalls his boyhood on the island of Singapore in the 1930's. With concrete imagery, the straightforward, uncondescending text describes the day-to-day routines of rural and urban Singapore; the decorative paintings add a profusion of visual details. The text tells us, for instance, that the sweetest-smelling flower is the ilang-ilang and that the beautician removes facial hair "by coating the face with thick white powder and then rolling strands of string over it." The paintings depict such minute details as the pattern of a bamboo basket, the design on a porcelain vase, and the markings on a kite or parasol; they also differentiate the species of birds and flowers, the kitchen herbs and spices, the cooking utensils, and the shopkeepers' paraphernalia.

The paintings are especially effective in creating a single mood: they glow with the memories of an idealized childhood, of "those wonderful times at Grandmother's house" and of the "beautiful and exciting time" when "the streets of Singapore were full of mystery, magic and color." The world depicted is an idyllic one, timeless, seasonless, and shadowless. Birds with folded wings float across skies that are always blue; trees and grass are always green; flowers bloom everywhere, indoors and out. The New Year's banquet is held outdoors in a sunny summer landscape. There is no night. The colours are warm red brown, oranges and golds, warm-toned greens, pale yellows and blues. In the decorative style of folk art, perspective is primitive and shapes are flat, not contoured. Pattern, not realism, is emphasized; and the patterned arrangements of colours and shapes reinforce our impression that Lim's Singapore was a place of unchanging harmony.

In both books the illustrations are not always synchronized with the relevant texts, nor do they always reflect accurately what is said in the texts. The omissions and discrepancies are few, but noticeable, suggesting that the paintings may have been completed first and the texts written afterwards. In the section headed "When night came on," the bats fly against a daylit blue sky; the darkness, the shadows, the lizards and the frogs mentioned in the text are not pictured. Such details would disrupt the idyllic mood. Other discrepancies are less excusable. We read that Johnnie's father visits the astrologer, but the illustration shows the astrologer talking to a seated woman. We read that the storyteller points to the sky with his walking stick, but in the illustration the walking stick points down while the storyteller's free hand points up. The black patch on the recurring dog sometimes encircles the left eye, sometimes the right.

Although the settings and furnishings in the John Lim books are realistically rendered, the human figures are flat, stiff, and unvaried. The humans exist only as parts of an ornamental design rather than as individualized portraits. In *At Grandmother's house*, they seem to float effortlessly and decora-

tively across the open picture space, in a static summer landscape; the overall effect thus created is one of spaciousness and leisure. In contrast, the spatial organization in *Merchants of the mysterious east* economically conveys the impression of crowded streets: the foreground is filled with triangular groups of human figures carrying on the main activities, while the backdrop provides a glimpse of space beyond. The figures may be identified as male or female by shape, and as juvenile or adult by size: women's bodies are cone-shaped or more tubular than the men's. Everyone is barefoot. All faces are perfectly circular, undifferentiated, and expressionless. Women's faces differ only in having redder rosebud mouths, circular rosy cheeks, and occasionally, longer lower eyelid lines. Inexplicably, all eyes are blue. The only variations are the black eyes and black beards of the astrologer and the fortuneteller and a couple of slight differences in hair style. Most faces are turned upwards, often in anatomically improbable positions. A possibly tongue-in-cheek explanation for this stylistic quirk occurs in *Merchants of the mysterious east*: "The tellers of stories and fortunes seemed to pull their ideas from the air, but to Johnnie the people of Singapore seemed to put far more things *into* the air than they took out of it. No wonder everyone was always looking up." But do women look up while they prepare dinner in the kitchen? And do diners at a New Year's banquet hold their chopsticks next to faces that are gazing at the sky? By thus picturing humans as ornamental shapes to be artistically manipulated, John Lim dehumanizes them. No character may be identified as Johnnie, and no character is personalized sufficiently to capture a child's interest and emotional involvement. Furthermore, the failure to individualize people encourages the notion that "Chinese all look alike" and are "inscrutable."

The illustrations also reinforce sex-role stereotypes. Not only do men and boys outnumber women and girls, but the former are depicted with more variation and in more interesting poses. Whereas men's clothing varies, the women's and girls' dresses are identical in style and floral pattern. In the country, boys play games, run in the rain, fish in the stream, feed pigs, and herd ducks. Women and girls are stiff tubular figures that stand and watch, their arms held straight down or rigidly horizontal, sometimes with child in tow. Although we are told that Grandma runs her farm well, we do not see her perform any tasks other than cooking and washing. Similarly, in the city, where the merchants and customers are chiefly men, the most active figures in the most dynamic poses are the astrologer, the storyteller, the fortuneteller, the parasol vendor, the knickknack vendor, the frog vendor, and the herb vendor – all male. A few women grind spices, sell beauty services, shop for embroidery, and buy parasols (a new one for each new dress), but usually the women and girls merely stand and watch the men and boys.

At Grandmother's house and *Merchants of the mysterious east* are informative and visually attractive. Together with his emphasis on a single idyllic mood, John Lim's preoccupation with pattern results in a series of aestheti-

cally satisfying paintings. But that same preoccupation leads to a depersonalization and stereotyping of characters. However fine the paintings, when they fail to reflect textual details accurately and when they reinforce racial and sex-role stereotypes, they do not function well as illustrations.

Markedly different in tone and style is *West Coast Chinese boy*, Sing Lim's recollections of his boyhood in Vancouver's Chinatown during the 1920's. Most of his memories are pleasant and humorous, yet the book does not idealize the past. Matter-of-factly, the anecdotes reveal the poverty, prejudice, and cruelty Sing Lim experienced. He scavenged for coal along the railroad, worked thirteen-hour days on a farm when he was nine years old, caught lice from one of the "viaduct people," and was taunted and attacked by the white boys. To balance his account, he reveals that prejudice and cruelty existed among the Chinese also: older children born in China looked down upon Chinese children born in Canada; a child suffering from rickets was ridiculed as "Crippled Kee"; and neighbours would not interfere when a Chinese guardian mistreated his boy.

In spite of the racism, Sing Lim has some positive memories of contacts between Chinese and other cultures: Chinese peddlers gave their white customers Christmas gifts of candied ginger, lai-chee nuts, or tea; Mr. Mac hired out his moving van to carry the Chinese orchestra in the funeral processions; Miss Scott, the third-grade teacher, encouraged Lim in his drawing. The young Lim especially loved the print of Breughel's *Winter scene*, salvaged by a janitor who lived in the apartment downstairs, and he looked forward to the special meals of liver and onions because he was then allowed to use a knife and fork instead of chopsticks. On the whole, though, the book shows the Chinese interacting much less frequently with the whites than with other minorities. Lim's father learned Chinook in order to do business with the Indians and befriended a lame Indian boy; the Chinese farmer hired Japanese women and girls; and the poultry-shop owner sold chickens to East Indians and to a rabbi.

Sing Lim conveys the impression that the Chinese in Vancouver, isolated as they were by discrimination and injustice, drew strength from their community and from their sense of humour. In an afterword, he writes that he was able to survive the suffering by laughing: "it is the sense of humor of the Chinese that helps us live through the unlivable." The "struggle between being Chinese and being Canadian: he resolved in his own way, by turning to art, "a more universal culture." Yet the tone and words of his book sometimes belie his claim that he has come to terms with his boyhood experiences, for he appears to be ambivalent towards his Chinese heritage. Cultural tension surfaces in much of the humour – not in the incidents of boyish pranks and mischief, but in the humorous comments frequently made at the expense of Chinese traditions. Lim writes that during the baby's head-shave celebration, "On the partially bald head [of the baby], the women placed a funny-looking ceremonial bonnet with jade and gold ornaments pinned to it. To me it looked like a Mickey

Mouse cap." The young Lim who enjoyed listening to Chinese musical instruments felt that "The sounds were all terrible, and I loved them." He preferred to attend a school with mixed classes: "I was already going to regular public school in the daytime and liked it. But Chinese school was another matter. I looked like a jailbird, and felt like one too." And to him, the mourners at a rich Chinese man's funeral, "the best parade in town," looked "like performers from the minstrel show."

The cultural and artistic merit of *West Coast Chinese boy* lies in the text more than in the illustrations which are uninformative and poorly synchronized with the text. The 100 pen-and-ink line drawings, presumably intended to be humorous, are child-like caricatures. The ugly stick-limbed figures and the few slit-eyed faces that grin maliciously suggest negative stereotypes of cruel Chinese. In the 22 full-page coloured monotypes, shapes are roughly delineated with heavy calligraphic lines and crudely filled in so that details, such as facial features, are blurred. Although these faces do not express malice, they are bleak and the skin tones are sometimes yellow. The colours are muted: much greyed blue and purple, dull greens, yellows, oranges, and browns. The blurred effect and the low-keyed colours appropriately echo the sombre mood of the harsh life being described, but are unappealing to children.

The coloured illustrations strengthen the impression of a community working together. The lack of background detail and the restricted sense of space



throw into sharper focus the way in which the people are interacting. Although their facial features are generalized and unexpressive, the human figures communicate through pose and gesture a feeling of bustle and tension as they engage in ordinary activities: cooking at a wood stove, mending shoes, hanging fish and mustard greens to dry, selling poultry or medicines, smoking water pipes, or playing music. No picture depicts a lone person; most

depict three or more people sharing an activity. This emphasis on the group is both a strength and a weakness of the illustrations, for none of the human figures is individualized. The father and the Indian hunter can be distinguished by their clothing and body shapes (short and pudgy versus tall and thin); the East Indian can be identified by his turban and white beard; but the Chinese boy and his Indian friend are indistinguishable because they have identical features, dress, and yellow skin.

The community portrayed in *West Coast Chinese boy* is 90% male. Even at the bear paw banquet, the feasters and the cooks are all men. Women appear

in only four of the coloured illustrations and are mentioned in the text primarily in two sections, "My mother" and "Baby's head shave." This portrayal of Chinatown as a man's world, while historically accurate, is unexplained in the book. And Chinese women, although rarely seen in the streets, would have been stronger presences in the home than Lim's book suggests.

West Coast Chinese boy, then, fails to transcend historical sex-role stereotypes; the illustrations may even suggest racial stereotypes; and the tone communicates an uneasy ambivalence towards Chinese culture. Nevertheless, for older children, the book gives an interesting and informative picture of the life of a Canadian boy growing up in the early days of Vancouver's Chinatown.

Outstanding among the memoirs is *A child in prison camp*, a chronicle of a period in Shizuye Takashima's life which could have been traumatizing, but which she recalls without anger or bitterness: her three years (1942-1945) in a British Columbia internment camp for Japanese-Canadians. The present-tense narration of young Shichan is deceptively simple and powerfully restrained. Dialogue, descriptions of customs, and documentary details arise naturally out of a narrative that is cinematic in structure. Shichan is not, as the cover blurb states, a dispassionate narrator. Her child-like detachment shields her from the anger and the hatred ("I, being only eleven, seem to be on the outside."), but it does not prevent her from feeling pain, sorrow, and compassion. With understated emotion, she reports the initial disbelief, the horror as the men were evacuated, the shock of dislocation and loss of freedom, the determination to make the best of a harsh and alien environment, and the tension that came close to breaking apart the family. Her sensitivity to natural beauty and her propensity to seek out the positive in every new experience overshadow the painfulness of her life in the camp – so much so, that Shichan's account may leave the reader with the mistaken impression that the suffering of the Japanese was regrettable but not too terrible.

Shichan's acute perception, ready sympathy, and aesthetic sensitivity make her an excellent narrator. Emotion-laden details, vivid yet restrained, record her observations; understatements then reveal her own deep feeling. For instance, in the opening scene at the train station, the men are being "dragged violently into the trains: amidst "Angry, dark curses" and threats. With "hellish" white smoke and ugly wheels, the train "grunts," "moves with a lurch," and finally "coils away." After mentioning the silent tears and the prayers, Shichan simply states, "The silent God seems so far away." Later, she bleakly sums up what is happening to them all: "The government takes our home." In the camp, where they must remain under the watch of the RCMP, she never underlines the harshness of the living conditions, but leads us to imagine them almost incidentally. She says that their three-room house looks "like a summer bungalow," then adds that they must share that home with another family, a total of seven persons. At night, they light their two "frail, rationed candles." In the winter, her pillow sticks to the cold damp walls. They walk a mile to

fetch drinking water. In near-by New Denver, the villagers are amazed that the Japanese speak English and wear shoes. After the church service, few people wish them Merry Christmas, "for they are not supposed to be too friendly towards us. But I'm used to it now, or like to think I am. . . ."

The camp has its pleasures: Kabuki plays; the August festival of the dead (O-ban), celebrated with singing, dancing, coloured lanterns, and costumes; the Red Cross-sponsored receipt of gifts of food from Japan, including the prized soya sauce and *miso* bean paste; and later, the bathhouse where anyone might relax and hear the latest news or rumours. For the most part, however, Shichan's pleasures are private: she finds solace in her imagination, in daydreams, and in nature. Unusually sensitive to the life around her, she notices that "The leaves of a lettuce gently curl as the water falls on its face." When she is stripping corncobs, she muses, "Soon they'll be eaten and I'll forget all about them. And it took so long for them to grow." Nature, "all-giving and so silent," is sometimes distant, but always beautiful and, in contrast to the contentious humans, peaceful and reassuring.

Since Shichan is not usually self-pitying, angry, or resentful, all the more surprising is the outburst that reveals how deeply the family quarrels have hurt her: "All of a sudden I hate that country for having started the war. I say aloud, 'Damn Japs! Why don't they stop fighting?'" Father glares: "What do you mean 'Japs'? You think you're not a Jap? If I hear you say that again I'll throttle you." I see anger and hatred in his eyes."

The characterization of Shichan and her family as unique individuals, and of the Japanese in general as neither romanticized nor stereotyped, largely accounts for the imaginative power of Takashima's book, for its ability to touch our emotions. Rather than remaining docile and uncomplaining, the Japanese do not easily accept the conditions forced upon them. In addition to the conflicts between Japanese and whites, there are quarrels and fights among the Japanese and disagreements within the family. Shichan's father insists that "We won't give in" and, after he organizes an unsuccessful protest strike, becomes known as a troublemaker. The men fight for coal-oil lamps, piped-in water, and a communal bathhouse. They win the right to have their children educated. Nor are the women passive. Shichan's sister argues with the shopkeepers who overcharge her, and the women all discuss the rightness and wrongness of various actions. The mother and the sister defy the father, thus negating the stereotype of Japanese women showing unquestioning obedience to the men.

Because *A child in prison camp* looks like a picture book and is marketed as one, this excellent portrayal of a Japanese experience may be missing its audience,³ for young children lack the literary sophistication and aesthetic maturity to understand and enjoy both the narrative and the illustrations. *Children's choices of Canadian books* concludes that Takashima's book is "A moving story for those who can be persuaded to read it, from age 11 to 14, and

even adult. . . . Perhaps it is a statement on prevailing attitudes toward art that almost none of the children enjoyed the award-winning illustrations at all."⁴ The eight watercolour paintings, predominately blue-green and gold, are impressionistic: settings and actions are merely suggested, and figures are so amorphous and hazy that without the accompanying text the subjects of the paintings would remain a mystery. Whereas young children may be put off by the lack of recognizable detail, more mature readers can appreciate the atmosphere evoked by the paintings – the warmth and sociability of the bathhouse, the excitement of the O-ban festival, and the disturbing fury of the night fire. The final scene, in which the sun's rays stream through the morning mist to illuminate Shichan and her mother rinsing clothes in the lake, emphasizes the note of peaceful optimism on which the story ends.

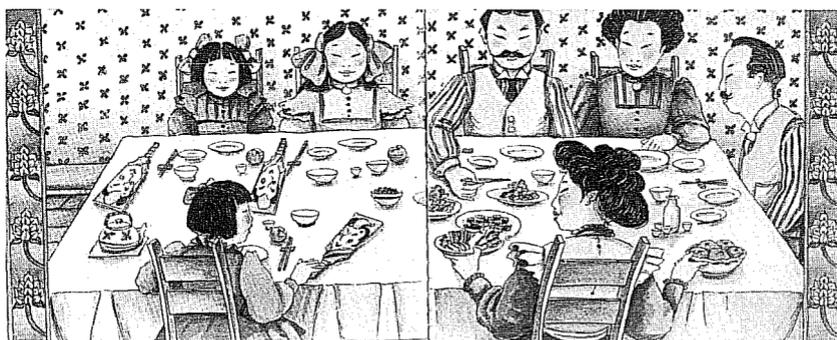
Like the four books discussed above, *Michi's New Year*, by Shelley Tanaka, is set in the east and is nostalgic in tone, but unlike the memoirs, it has a simple story which makes Michi's experience more accessible to young children (ages 6 to 9). Having recently come to Canada in 1912, ten-year-old Michi is homesick for Japan – for her friends and grandparents and many cousins, for her school, for her family's house "with its delicate paper screen doors and quiet garden" and for "the special sweet black beans" she used to eat at New Year's. She finds Canada "such a cold place," "big and dirty and lonely"; her Canadian clothes feel uncomfortable and strange. Her dilemma is simplistically resolved: at the end of the book she is happy, not because she accepts her new world, but because, for the moment, her old world has been recreated. The traditional Japanese New Year's dinner, including a bowl of black beans, makes Michi feel at home: as her friend Kimi exclaims, "It looks just like Japan." Ron Berg's illustrations of traditional Japanese food, dress, and architecture provide an integral backdrop to the story of Michi's plight.

The book is visually attractive in the style of traditional Japanese prints, which it imitates more in form and line than in spirit. The larger illustrations have borders of lotus blossoms, conventional Eastern symbols, but what the lotus represents here is not clear. New life, perhaps? More effective is Berg's use of colour: browns for unhappiness; green, gold, orange, and red for happiness. Michi's unhappiness is expressed visually as she sits, in the rain, hunched up on the doorstep of her sepia-toned dilapidated house; or as she stands, tiny and forlorn, in a barren yard on a receding street of stiff, forbidding houses. Even the waves of her remembered sea-voyage are grey-brown. The straight, cold lines of the picket fence, the worn veranda railing, the boardwalk, and the leafless bushes are images of confinement and sterility. In contrast are the illustrations of Michi's remembered life in Japan: the buildings have warm brown walls, red tile roofs, and curving lines; an inviting stone path curves up to a house nestled in graceful greenery. In the later illustrations, warm colours and bright greens herald the change in Michi's mood. The boy who waves at Michi wears red; her friends wear gold and red-orange; the Stanley

Park which Kimi talks about is spacious and green. Finally, the warm bright colours of the New Year's dinner resolve Michi's problem. After a close-up of the table, the book ends with a formal dinner scene.

The cover illustration pictures Michi as she remembers herself in Japan, and the frontispiece pictures her as she now is in Canada. In both, she faces us directly as she clasps her Japanese doll, a link to her past life. On the cover, above a border of green lotus and against a backdrop of rosy sky and blue Hokusai waves, Michi is the stereotypical Japanese girl with heart-shaped face, upswept black hair, and red-striped kimono. Framed by the lotus, she holds her doll elegantly. In the frontispiece, Michi has short straight hair, her bangs cut straight across the forehead; she wears a high-collared, ruffled green dress that gives her a hunched-forward look as she awkwardly holds and suffocates her doll. Her expression is timid and tentative.

The major flaws of the illustrations are the stereotypes masquerading as figures in the style of Japanese art. In the final scene, we look at a table behind which are four stiff figures with identical narrow eyes, mere suggestions



of eyebrows, puckered small mouths, and slight smiles. The last words of the story confirm the traditional stereotype: "And everybody politely nodded and smiled." The women and girls wear the same style of hair (just as the girls in Japanese scenes wear almost identical kimonos), and the men, with identical handlebar mustaches, wear vests, ties, and shirts that differ only in the colour of the stripes. Throughout the book, the faces reveal little emotion and no individuality: they are "inscrutable" and impassive. True, traditional Japanese prints depict people similarly, but with more variation and vitality.

Lack of action is a weakness of both story and illustrations. The Japanese women and girls always appear to be standing or sitting, not moving. The sole actions are those of non-Japanese: one boy bicycles, another rollerskates, and a girl skips rope. Japanese female passivity is undoubtedly a historical reality, but Berg's illustrations exaggerate the passivity to conform to the "China doll" stereotype. Surely Michi could have been portrayed walking, or picking up food

with chopsticks, or reaching out to bat the feathered ball.

Michi's New Year, then, while helping a child to appreciate Japanese art, may also transmit traditional stereotypes. It encourages the assumption that a culture can be identified by its major festivals and foods. And it suggests that those festive foods are the simple solution to a child's loneliness and unhappiness in the midst of an alien culture.

Two picture books have contemporary Canadian settings: Adelle LaRouche's *Binky and the bamboo brush* and Ian Wallace's *Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance*. Each depicts a Chinese boy whose fear of failing alienates him temporarily from his family. In each book, an older person helps the boy resolve his crisis, regain his self-confidence, and earn his family's recognition. The resolutions come via features of Chinese culture well known to Canadians: Chinese brush painting and the lunar New Year's festival. By giving Binky the treasured bamboo brush, the grandfather shows him the way to discover the beauty and spiritual harmony of the self as it responds to external nature, the way of Chinese painting. By practising with Chin Chiang the steps of the dragons' dance, the old woman, Pu Yee, shows him that he is ready to join his grandfather in the dance which is the community's tribute to the New Year.

Like the West Coast Chinese boy, Binky hates Chinese school and for much the same reason: it keeps him from playing with his friends after regular school, and the teacher is strict. When Binky cannot remember the Chinese characters, he is punished for daydreaming. Because his parents discover that he has played truant from Chinese school, he is confined to home. There he becomes more aware that his grandfather has stopped making beautiful ink paintings and is withdrawing serenely into himself. The brush that is Binky's legacy from his grandfather remains unvalued at first. After his grandfather's death, Binky begins to see outdoors the beauty which his grandfather had been able to paint, and he discovers within himself a gift for painting.

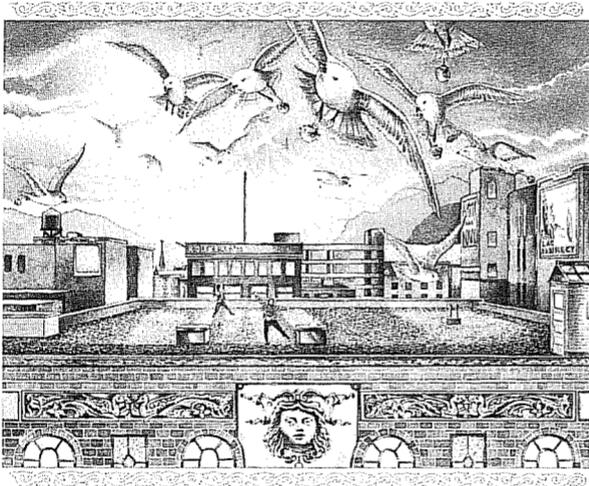
Two aspects of this story are misleading. With the help of "a very special brush," Binky seems to master the art of brush painting effortlessly and immediately. The art comes to him as a gift of inspiration, yet in reality such skill requires a talent fostered and disciplined by years of study and practise. Secondly, the grandfather's death is almost incidental: when Binky comes home one day to find that his grandfather is not in his usual place, his mother merely puts her hand on his shoulder and tritely comments, "None of us can hope to live forever." There is no show of grief or mourning, not even the hint of a funeral.

Futhermore, LaRouche's mediocre style does not do justice to her theme. Tone and style never rise above the blandness of the opening, "Benjamin Kee was a little Chinese boy who lived in Chinatown." Nearly every paragraph begins with "Binky," and the frequent simplistic comments become irritating: "Binky's family was a happy family"; "Binky was a helpful boy too"; and "As you see, Binky was a good boy. Except for one thing. He hated Chinese school."

The story of Binky is nevertheless nicely shaped, but without the intensity and drama that we find in the story of Chin Chiang, which limits the action to one day. Chin Chiang is afraid that he is not ready to join his grandfather in dancing the dragon's dance to welcome the Year of the Dragon. Fleeing the fierce, powerful dragon (the symbol of the male principle), he runs like a rabbit. The rabbit lantern which he converts into a headdress is an emblem of his fear and timidity and sense of smallness. Seeking refuge, Chin Chiang runs into the library, up the spiral staircase, and onto the roof, where he meets a cleaning woman, Pu Yee. As they practise the steps of the dance together, they restore each other's confidence. Chin Chiang then returns to take his place in the celebration; he accepts responsibility and takes the first steps to manhood.

Although both books narrate effective stories that portray the child protagonists sensitively, only Wallace's book has equally effective illustrations. LaRouche's crayon pictures in *Binky and the bamboo brush* are unremarkable and unexciting. They mirror the text accurately and establish a firm sense of setting, but since they are unable to suggest nuances of tone and characterization, the pictures are only shallow reflections of the theme. Colours are mainly dark blue and yellow (perhaps because of their associations with China), purple and green. The streets and shops are recognizably those of Vancouver's Chinatown. The Kee home has both Chinese and Western furnishings. Binky's sister plays with a Caucasian doll while her father reads a Chinese paper and other family members admire the brush paintings on the wall. One of Binky's friends, seen only from the back, is light-haired. Faces are sometimes expressive but rarely individualized: eyes are frequently narrowed, and in the classroom a frowning teacher presides over rows of identical faces. When Binky plays truant, his wanderings are an excuse to give the reader a tour of Chinatown, where the Blue Eagle Café sells French fries and the Chinese bakery sells steamed buns. Some of these details of setting and culture are essential to the narrative, but others are self-consciously and gratuitously introduced as interesting exotic items. Why should Binky be fascinated by shop displays of meats, vegetables, and curios that he must have passed countless times? Even though the story covers at least several weeks, Binky wears a red t-shirt and shorts, white socks, and blue shoes in every scene but one (where he is dressed for bed).

In *Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance*, the pictures do more than merely illustrate the places and events in the story: they deepen our psychological and emotional involvement. Indeed, Wallace's striking paintings almost overpower the text. The frontispiece and the tailpiece establish the story's timespan. In the first picture, Chin Chiang is in his bedroom, reaching up or stretching, smiling across the bed at a dragonfly kite suspended from the ceiling. In the final picture, he contentedly looks out his window at the pigeons swirling into the night-sky. The opening scenes are set indoors, in the enclosed spaces of the family bakeshop and the oven room, where an uncertain Chin Chiang, his



hands in his pockets, faces a splendid dragon, then seems to cower as the dragon rears up. From the shop, the action moves out into the street, reaches up to the roof and the sky, returns to the community celebration in the street, and finally settles into the domestic integration of the home.

The street signs and the city skyline identify the setting as Vancouver's Chinatown, where men and women carry on their daily chores of selling oranges, fish, and flowers as they prepare for the New Year.

In every illustration is a dragon or dragon figure – a kite or a lantern or Pu Yee, who wears the dragon's colours. The scenes are framed by a unifying dragon-motif border, but the dramatic shifts in perspective prevent them from becoming stage sets which separate us from the action. Every third illustration has a spiral composition, unmistakably identified with the upwardly curving dragon as it rears imperiously over the boy, then with the spiral staircase, the leaping dancers and the swirling pigeons, and the dragon again. The last two scenes have public and private settings: the exultant Chin Chiang and Pu Yee are framed by the Chinese gate and the celebrating crowds as the dragon spirals down the street; then the pair become part of the quieter family celebration. Appropriately, in the formally balanced final scene opposites are linked: old and young, male and female, dragon and phoenix (in the lantern and the painting), yin and yang.

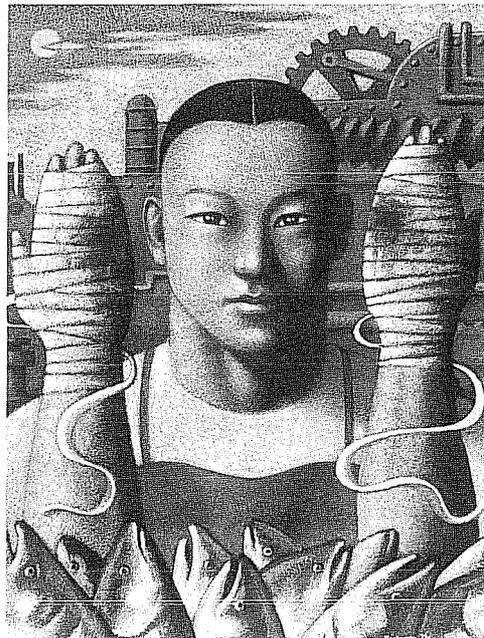
The colours are equally expressive. At first, there are more browns and greyed blues. Then reds and purples expand and dominate the picture space, with touches of green – the colours of the dragon – until, at the climax, there is an explosion of brilliant red. In the final domestic scene, the sense of harmony is reinforced by the balanced distribution of red, purple, blue, green, and brown.

Wallace's illustrations avoid racial stereotyping. Chin Chiang is Chinese without being yellow-skinned or slit-eyed. His anxious, frowning expression of the early scenes changes into one of concentration, followed by pleasure and contentment. The direction of his glance catches and guides our attention. His body language echoes his feelings. His clothes – jeans, jean jacket, and runners

– are like those of other Canadian boys. The illustrations also avoid sex-role stereotyping, for they depict men and women, dressed in both Western and Chinese clothes, sharing daily tasks.

Since the text makes no reference to Canada and the illustrations show no non-Chinese, a reader could be misled into assuming that the story is set outside of Canada.⁵ Wallace's book is also open to the charge that it misrepresents the dragon's dance by implying that it could be danced by two people. Such possible flaws, however, are minor in a picture book that is otherwise exceptional in its imaginative rendition of a Chinese-Canadian experience. Among the books being discussed, *Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance* is the only story which invites the young reader to share the thoughts and feelings of the main character.

In the recently published *Tales from Gold Mountain*, Paul Yee's eight stories are uneasy fusions of memory and fiction, realism and fantasy. The afterword points out that the stories "are all firmly rooted in real places and events, in things such as the work world of the Chinese, the folk traditions they brought from China, and the frontier society of this continent." The settings are those of the New World "many, many years ago," with references to "a busy port city," railways being built by workgangs, Northern gold fields, fish canneries, and a Chinatown gambling hall. Traditional folklore motifs include the trickster, the restless dead, the faithful lover, the ambiguous oracle, and the impossible tasks. The evils are not only individual outlaws, murderers, vengeful hosts, and greedy bosses, but also social attitudes and problems such as racism,



unemployment, indifference, negligence, and outmoded values. A white boss treats his Chinese workers "like mules and dogs"; a blind gambler of mixed blood is shunned by both races because his eyes are "blue as sky, green as pine"; when Kwan Ming and his friends look for work, doors slam in their faces; workers are killed in mudslides or by improperly set dynamite fuses; and a father gives away his twin daughters in order to replace them with boys.

Events and images are frequently horrifying. The ghost has "slimy rags hanging from a body of bones"; a knife protrudes from its back; and

"the stench of rotting flies" fills the night. Another ghost is clothed in "blood-stained trousers and a mud-encrusted jacket." The blind stranger's eyes are "sealed with hardened spittle and settled dust." To take revenge on his unjust employer, Lee Jim supposedly cuts off his baby fingers and seals them in the salmon tins; in the illustration he holds up his bloody bandaged hands. This is no book for the squeamish or the nightmare-prone. Because Yee's tales are set in a recognizably real world and contain lurid descriptions, the mutilations are horrifying and disturbing in a way they would not be in a Grimms' folktale. In *Gold Mountain* there are no fairy godmothers; it is a cruel and tragic world in which the important virtues are endurance, determination, resilience, and a sense of humour.

Simon Ng's illustrations, too, are sombre. In the style of Renaissance painting, most of the picture space is filled with a head-and-shoulders portrait; the setting is suggested in the background; and emblematic details (machinery, waves, salmon heads, a seedling, a threaded needle, a mallet, a locomotive) reinforce the theme. The figures are monumental; their skins appear to have the texture of granite. The men have powerful necks and shoulders, expressions of firm determination, and granite-toned or orangey skins. The two women are graceful and curving; one embroiders, the other tends a plant. Although the range of emotions is restricted, the faces are individualized. One portrait, of the greedy Chinese boss who explodes from overeating, is grotesquely and appropriately ugly.

Since women play significant roles and are the main characters in two stories, Yee's book escapes the historical stereotyping evident in the memoirs by John Lim and Sing Lim. The women demonstrate strength of character, patience, gentleness, and understanding. In "Ginger for the heart," Chang the merchant tailor refuses to arrange a marriage for his daughter because he treasures her happiness. When her lover must leave her, Yenna "did not weep uselessly" but continues to sew and to sing. When her father loses his sight, she runs the business, then invites her returned lover to join her: "But this is a new land. . . . Must we forever follow the old ways?" In "Forbidden fruit," Fong's daughter and her lover "labored as equals." When the lover departs forever, his gift of seeds eventually bears blood-red fruit – tomatoes – which become a source of prosperity for the family and a reminder of the daughter and "her love for the farmhand Johnson."

Tales from Gold Mountain is notable for its originality, literary style, imaginative intensity, and lack of stereotyping. Yee says that he hopes his stories, based on memories so bitter that many people have tried to forget, "will carve a place in the North American imagination for the many generations of Chinese who have settled there." He succeeds admirably in depicting the hard life of the first Chinese in Canada while also revealing their sense of humour. But it is the horror and the determination, more than the humour, that linger with the reader. Like *A child in prison camp*, Yee's book, though published,

reviewed, and catalogued as a children's book, is not for younger children.

Ranging in style from the decorative and traditional to the impressionistic and symbolic, the pictures in all the books are often effective, judged as separate works of art; as children's book illustrations, however, most reveal shortcomings. Failure to differentiate and personalize the characters promotes the racial stereotype that Orientals look alike, do things in groups, and rarely express their feelings. Portraying women infrequently or only in passive and domestic roles reinforces the historical and cultural stereotype that females are weak, unimportant, and uninteresting. Outside of *Tales from Gold Mountain*, there are no Chinese female role models; and of the two Japanese female protagonists, Shichan and Michi, the latter is timid and inert. Another disturbing feature, the lack of crosscultural interaction, conveys the impression that Orientals are primarily shopkeepers who live apart in quaint communities noted for exotic foods and New Year's festivities. Crosscultural contacts are irrelevant in John Lim's books and are treated historically, with references to racism, in the books by Sing Lim, Takashima, and Yee; but they are inexplicably absent from the two stories set in contemporary Chinatowns, where we would expect to see at least some non-Chinese shoppers or sightseers.

On the positive side, the books are informative and varied in style. Rather than ignoring or romanticizing the past, several acknowledge the racism and demonstrate the value of humour in coping with adversity. The books that best transcend the stereotypes, by depicting Japanese and Chinese in situations requiring dynamic and emotional responses, are *A child in prison camp*, *Tales from Gold Mountain*, and *Chin Chiang and the dragon's dance*.

We now need more picture books which portray Chinese and Japanese, especially women, in a wider range of occupations, living in communities other than Vancouver, participating in the mainstream of Canadian life, and facing the problems of living in a white or multicultural society. I am not advocating that we deny or play down historical realities, only that we make available a broader spectrum of experience; and that we have more stories which encourage young readers not just to observe an alien culture but to participate imaginatively in new cultural experiences.

NOTES

- 1 "How children's books distort the Asian American image," in Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard, *Cultural conformity in books for children* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1977), 83. See also the Council's "Criteria for analyzing books on Asian Americans," 87-90.
- 2 Folktales may meet these criteria, but are outside the scope of this discussion. An excellent example is Monica Hughes, *Little fingerling*, illus., Brenda Clark (Toronto: Kids Can Press, 1989). See Ivy Chan, "Folktales in the development of multicultural literature for children," *TESL Talk* (Winter/Spring 1984): 19-28.
- 3 Joy Kogawa's *Naomi's Road*, illus. Matt Gould (Toronto: Oxford University Press,

1986), is about the same length and is also targeted at an audience of 8 to 11 years, yet it is published in novel format and is advertised on the back cover as "the first Canadian novel for young readers to deal with an important and painful episode in Canadian history."

4 *Children's choices of Canadian books* 2 (1983): 75.

5 *Children's choices of Canadian books* comments: "Virtually every reader thought the story took place in China; not one noted the details in the drawings which seem to indicate Vancouver's Chinatown, perhaps not surprising for children from the National Capital area." 4 (1985): 77.

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