

“A Backward Way of Thanking People”: Paul Yee on his Historical Fiction

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Résumé: Dans cette entrevue, Paul Yee, lauréat du prix du Gouverneur Général, parle de sa passion pour l’histoire sino-canadienne, de l’influence de son enfance sur ses oeuvres, de la politique de la représentation culturelle et de sa vision du rôle de l’artiste.

Summary: In this interview, Paul Yee, winner of the 1996 Governor General’s Award, discusses his passion for Chinese-Canadian history, the influence of his upbringing as an orphan on his fiction, the politics of cultural representation, and his portrayal of the artist.

In Paul Yee’s most recent and, arguably, one of his darkest works of fiction, *Ghost Train*, a young painter travels from China to North America to be reunited with her father, a worker on the Canadian railway. Sadly, she discovers upon her arrival in Canada that her father and his crew have been killed on the job, like so many other railway workers “swept away by the river or buried under a landslide.” From here on, Choon-yi’s project is to fulfil her father’s wish to have his and his fellow workers’ souls transported back home to China. In the process of effecting this transmigration, Choon-yi meets the ghosts of her father and his fellow workers and gets a glimpse of their lives in Canada. Significantly, Choon-yi does all of this through the medium of her art, and in this respect, she, as painter, is the very image of her creator, Paul Yee. For Choon-yi’s art can do

everything Paul Yee has done and tried to do in his own art: document the past, pay homage to those who struggled and sacrificed, capture the spirit of a people, and negotiate the terrain between Old and New Worlds.

But this is no easy task. Choon-yi tries twice, unsuccessfully, to paint the “fire car,” and in these failures Yee thematizes the process by which art “represents” life and charts history. To some extent, the gap between aesthetic form and existential content explains the lack of power the first two paintings have. It is only when Choon-yi creates a painting that does not close out the pain of the railway workers’ lives and the horror of their deaths, it is only once she has been haunted by their “anguished wailing,” that she is able to produce a painting worthy of the men’s experience. This is when her painting truly comes alive. At the end of the story, Choon-yi burns her painting of the “fire car” and thus releases the workers’ souls, including her father’s, into their homeland. In this act, the symbolic functioning of her art is carried its furthest: not only does Choon-yi’s art provide entry into the past and a view of a community’s life, not only is it a record of human suffering, but it is also the instrument of spiritual liberation.

Of course, it does sound a little unlikely for someone who has been an archivist to construct a plot in which most of the characters are ghosts and in which the most crucial forms of communication take place through art and dreams. But in Yee’s world, the voices of the unseen are, paradoxically, critical to his accurate representation of history. His ghosts do not induce piety, rattle chains, or mutter spells: they merely speak the way people from the past might have spoken — unselfconsciously about their lives and their hopes — and in so doing they remind us of the historical realities of worker exploitation and social injustice. Although art was not Yee’s first love, he turned to fiction after completing an MA in history and after realizing that historical fiction had powers that history itself did not: “I have two degrees in history, and it’s very frustrating to do all that research and realize that society marginalizes history and doesn’t respect it. Everybody talks about how if you don’t know your past you won’t know your future. But people don’t pay much attention to the history we have lived through to know how tyranny happens and how a majority will try to oppress a minority.” Yee’s history books, *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* (1988) and *Struggle and Hope: The Story of Chinese Canadians* (1996), have been well-received, but their success is definitely overshadowed by the kind of enthusiasm his young adult novels, with their strange air of edginess and sympathy, and his folktales, with their stunning illustrations, inspire.

Clearly, Yee’s historical fiction would not be so successful were it merely archival research dressed up with a little plot complication and a denouement. Indeed, his work reveals much more than faithfulness to fact: he has an eye for telling physical details, an ability to dramatize emotion, and a knack for using simple but striking metaphors — talents which have been with him from his earliest forays into fiction. For instance, in “Prairie Widow” (1984) economy of metaphor substitutes for lengthy exegesis to capture the difference between the

terrain of the widow's Chinese homeland, with its natural borders and watch-towers, and her experience of the Canadian prairies: "Here she felt adrift in a swaying, unyielding ocean, and she clung to her hoe and shovel as if they were life-preservers" (9). And of the widow's lonely resilience the narrator remarks: "Gum-may had learned to wrap the isolation around her like a blanket sealing in the warmth of a solitary beating heart" (8). Yee's prose is still punctuated by such spontaneous similes, as in *Ghost Train* where the rivers "shot like fiery silver dragons through steep canyons" and where the train that carries the ghost workers pulls "a long chain of wheeled boxes like a huge snake slithering across a field." But *Ghost Train* also hints at developing powers with cadence; the father's command has a haunting, incantatory effect: "Paint me the fire-car, Daughter! Paint me the train that runs on the road I built." Furthermore, some of the cleanest writing you'll find is in Yee's novels, where, distilled into stubbornly concrete prose, is the turmoil of human experience and the sensual vitality of the perceptible world. His dialogue has the pacing of real speech, not the talky dullness of many YA novels, and his stories seem to be taking place before he even starts them, leaving the impression that he "found" his characters already engaged in their daily lives. This kind of naturalness extends to the way in which historical detail flows artlessly from plot and character. Like the best historical fiction, one senses that the writer knows more than he tells you about his chosen time and place.

In this interview, which focuses on key elements in Yee's fiction, I found out just how much more he knows.¹ I began by asking him about his own family history.

YEE: I'm of Chinese descent. I'm the first generation of my family to be born in Canada, but the third generation to be here. That is to say, my grandfather came here but went back to China where my father was born. My father came over, and then, after numerous years, my mother came over, and then my brother and I were born.

DAVIS: Why did your grandfather come over and when?

YEE: That's not very clear because my father died when I was very young. I really had no direct connection to my father's side of the family. My understanding is that my grandfather came over to work on the railroad. Then my father came over in 1922 when he was eleven years old. He came on student papers, which was a way of entering Canada whereby the head tax was rebated. He eventually wound up running a café in a small town in Saskatchewan — Naicam, which was my home. My actual birthplace was Spalding, Saskatchewan, where there was a hospital.

DAVIS: When did you move to BC?

YEE: My parents died shortly after I was born so I was taken to Vancouver and raised by my aunt and uncle there. My Aunt Lillian was born in Vancouver in 1895. She was of Chinese descent. My uncle was born in China and had come over in the 19-teens. My aunt was my uncle's second wife. His first wife was in China but because he couldn't bring her over, he had a common-law wife in Canada. My aunt had grown up here, so she spoke English fluently, wrote and

read English fluently, and had lived a great deal of the history that we read about.

DAVIS: How did you get interested in Chinese-Canadian history? Through her?

YEE: No, I was politicized when I finished high school. In the mid-'70s, there was a conference for young Chinese- and Japanese-Canadians looking at their identity, their roots and trying to figure out their connections to the community. This followed the tail end of the civil rights movement in the States and the rise of the black power movement.

DAVIS: And is that what started your investigation of the *Tales from Gold Mountain* stories?

YEE: Eventually, that's what led to it. I first had to reconnect to the community. Part of the ethnic "movement" on the West coast of North America at that time was fuelled by the third generation of Chinese and Japanese Canadians who had grown up in the '50s and '60s in a relatively racism-free, prosperous era and had been shielded from the history that our parents and grandparents had lived through. The parents probably felt, "Well, why burden them?" So there wasn't much of a connection between the young people and the physical Chinatowns and Japan towns all up and down the Pacific coast. And in the mid-'70s these people wanted to get politically involved, whether in academic projects or community protests or social services for seniors. So, there was a real community awakening amongst the third generation.

DAVIS: So, you went back to your community and tried to learn more about it? Were you making pragmatic contributions to it?

YEE: My pragmatic contribution in Vancouver was to a new organization that was trying to build a Chinese cultural centre. They had to prove that they were a credible organization so they needed lots of volunteers. So, there we were. We organized festivals and taught English and did fund-raising. Part of the group began to look into history, and so we did some oral history projects and some exhibitions.

DAVIS: Did you hear any of the tales you write from your aunt and uncle or did you find them through your research?

YEE: They're from my own research. I did a BA in history and then went on to do a Masters degree. I also worked in the Vancouver City Archives, so I had a fair idea of what sorts of historical materials were available and what the limitations were of doing Chinese-Canadian history.

DAVIS: What kind of limitations?

YEE: The primary sources were very limited. And all the secondary writings on Chinese-Canadian history revolved around racism: they described what the white power structure had done to various minorities. In all of these historical interpretations, the Chinese were always victims. But I always felt that ours was a community with its own history, with its own survival techniques, with its own celebrations of being here. I wanted to explore this, not their being oppressed victims of white racism. That sort of historical writing perpetuated the image that we were victims, and I hated being thought of as a victim.

DAVIS: One of the Chinese-Canadian students in my class at Western remarked

that she liked your work precisely because it didn't focus on victimization but rather on dignity through difficulty.

YEE: That's a good summation of what I would like my work to do. Racism existed; it has been documented. But we all do everybody a disservice if we think that that is all there is to our history. With fiction, so many things other than facts can be explored; this has drawn me to fiction as opposed to continuing to do more academic history.

DAVIS: I wanted to talk about *Roses Sing on New Snow*, which is a classic fairy tale in some ways. There are three children, the boastful father, and an unlikely winner, Maylin. Those are fairly traditional elements of the folk tale, but what is different in your story is that the girl, Maylin, works side by side with the governor and she is the one to offer wisdom in the end. Is this an original tale or is it one based on a folktale you heard or read?

YEE: It's original. Too many of the stories in *Tales from Gold Mountain* were male stories and I thought I should write stories featuring female protagonists. But the history doesn't really allow it because the early population was so predominantly male. The role of women was tightly controlled and constrained by the men.

DAVIS: So, the tale is not rooted in history at all?

YEE: *Roses* is like the other stories in *Tales from Gold Mountain*. It was originally part of that collection, but the publisher decided to make it a picture book on its own. Every one of those stories, including *Roses*, is an original tale, but they all spring from real-life history. *Tales from Gold Mountain* is about, in a broad sense, the dislocation of men away from family, their loneliness, and their search for home. Food as a metaphor for family, home, and community began to make sense to me and certainly a restaurant was one of the few places where there could be a direct connection between women and the male community. Whenever I sit down to write my stories I try to think of historical situations involving different occupations. We know there were houseboys, miners, railway workers and people who ran eateries, so I try to imagine what they did.

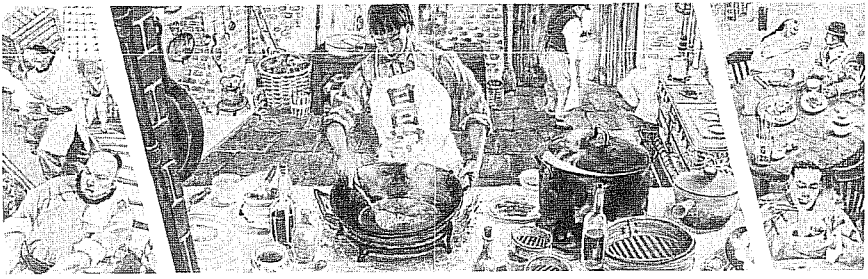
DAVIS: How likely would it be that someone like Maylin could have existed?

YEE: The restaurant could have existed but for her to cook in it would have taken extraordinary circumstances. Knowing how male-dominated the world was, and how superstitious the men were, they would not have wanted a woman there, not in a commercial establishment.

DAVIS: So, it's not that likely?

YEE: No.

DAVIS: Salman Rushdie has said that every culture — patriarchal, democratic, fundamentalist — offers up an ideology and says, "this is what we believe in and this is how we behave," but that within families themselves, say, at the dinner table, there is a lot of talk about current conditions and a questioning of their culture's ideology. Did you ever get the sense in your research that this was a possibility — that is, that even though Chinese culture was patriarchal, that



Maylin loved food too, but for different reasons. To Chinatown it came from lonely and cold and homesick. Their Lemons and wines raised in China.

But a well-cooked meal would always make them smile. So Maylin started to reuse their spits and used only the best ingredients in her cooking.

privately it might have allowed a voice for its daughters?

YEE: I would like to think so. The only people who can answer that are women who grew up in that era. I'm speaking from a position of male privilege, not knowing that other gender's reality of being deprived of the smallest of opportunities. But from my research, I don't have a positive impression of the patriarchy of the time. But, come to think of it, the Yip family, one of the most prominent merchant families in early Vancouver sent one of its Canadian-born daughters to attend university in the 1910s. She went on to become a school principal in China. That's pretty remarkable, so Rushdie may have a point there.

DAVIS: How many women came to the New World?

YEE: Women started coming in larger numbers after the 1910s, though I don't know the actual numbers. Other historians do, though.

DAVIS: Was this when Chinatown was more established?

YEE: Yes, but *Roses Sing on New Snow* was from the pre-1910 period because the governor comes from imperial China, which was abolished in 1911.

DAVIS: Would such an event have actually occurred: a governor from China coming to visit the New World?

YEE: There were visits to North America from high-ranking state officials. There are pictures of them. But they weren't at the governor's level. I had to choose a term that was useful for a broader audience.

DAVIS: On first reading, my students often think that *Roses Sing on New Snow* is a feminist tale about a girl who is subverting the patriarchy. But when we look more closely at it, we realise that that is, in fact, not the case. Maylin doesn't complain about her lack of recognition for one thing (even while her brothers take the praise that should rightly be hers). Do you see her as being oblivious to this because she is a committed artist or is she acquiescent because she is expected to be so?

YEE: That's a good question. My answer would be, "What's the more prominent issue: misogyny or racism?" I think the answer is that women in the

Chinese community realized that their interests were closer to those of Chinese men, being singled out as people of Chinese origin. This would be more prominent in their minds than their situation as women being oppressed by men. Maylin wouldn't see herself as a feminist, but she would understand that making a men's community that was oppressed feel better is a useful role.

DAVIS: So, she would identify herself as Chinese first?

YEE: Yes, there would be no doubt of that, simply because of the historical segregation and overwhelming racism of the period.

DAVIS: Can you tell me what the phrase "*Roses Sing on New Snow*" means. It's poetic and seems peculiarly Chinese.

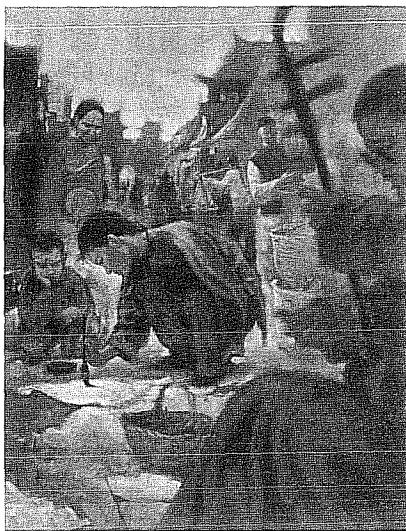
YEE: My original title was *The Cook Who Knew Everything*, but the editor thought this was boring, and the designer said, "Well, how about this: when you go into some Chinese restaurants, they have all these wonderful names for dishes like 'Eight Precious Jewels Soup' or 'Phoenix Claws.' Why don't you create a similar name for a dish that Maylin cooks?" So, I just took the basic colours of food — red for meat, green for vegetables, and white for rice — and thought of images for them. The roses are the meat and the white is the rice. It is a poetic term.

DAVIS: The "new snow" also made me think of new soil. One of your themes is the impossibility of taking a dish from the New World to the Old World; Maylin insists that you cannot do that. Why can't you?

YEE: [laughter] I think that's part of me saying that Chinese-Canadians who grow up in this country can never go back to China. There is a very clear cut between the old country and the new when immigration occurs. I'm using this to say that things in the old country are always going to be different, no matter how hard people want to recreate that country here. It just simply can't be done. So, I think you're right about the new snow/new soil bit. That certainly rings true. Socially and physically, you cannot recreate China in the new world. And it would be hard with food because the soil is of a different quality: China's soil is 3,000 years old. It's old; it's tired! Whereas in the New World, you have this incredibly energetic soil giving forth the rainforests and fertile farmlands of the West coast. People are always asking me, "Well, how Chinese do you think you are?" And I say, "minimally." I understand the Chinese culture but tremendous changes have happened, and I look for opportunities to make that point.

DAVIS: So, *Roses* is about Old and New World cultures; it's about women and patriarchy; and about early life in Canada. It's fascinating that it never settles down to a single message. Is it also about art?

YEE: In the end, yes. It's about how art cannot be copied: it springs from something unquantifiable; it cannot be measured, as in a recipe. And I like to think that *intent* has a lot to do with it. Maylin's intent in cooking is to nurture the community, whereas the governor's intent in cooking is to satisfy his own lusts. This is a very scientific world that we live in, where everything can be quantified and duplicated. I want to say, "no, I don't believe everything can be duplicated, and art is one of those things that can't be."



DAVIS: In *Ghost Train*, Choon-yi can't create using *only* her imagination. Before she actually gets on the train and sees the people and feels how the train moves, she can't really paint something convincing. What's your vision of art that's implied there?

YEE: You write about the things you know. I've always felt that you should write about what you know and feel most passionately about. For me, it's Chinese-Canadian history.

DAVIS: I wondered about Choon-yi's status as an artist. She also has only one arm. Does that physical challenge temper her power a bit — I mean, she is a girl who has exceptional powers to represent things and this sets her apart from others, female or male. I assume she is more mobile and independent than most females would be. Is she given more latitude in that culture because of her disability?

YEE: With Choon-yi, I want to suggest that people who come with special powers are often diminished in other ways. They suffer because of the powers they are given by the gods. Power comes compromised. Choon-yi will never be a princess; she will never be the elite. She would have enormous difficulty getting married in that historical setting. So, she would have to strike out on her own. Because she is disabled, she would do things that normal girls wouldn't do — even normal girls with artistic gifts — and she would have to possess enormous courage and will-power to do what she does.

DAVIS: So, she is not like Maylin who is "disabled" only by being oppressed in her family?

YEE: No. Certainly Maylin's story was written years before *Ghost Train*, and I'm not sure what has happened since then!

DAVIS: Do you see yourself reflected in Choon-yi — the artist on the margins, the underdog, the person who rises up and speaks for her family and people?

YEE: I have a hard time admitting it because it seems so presumptuous! [laughter] My whole upbringing taught me to remain invisible, to not draw attention to myself, but I do think that artists have that function in their community — they tend to be the ones who point to glaring issues and problems and serve a number of marginal, outsider roles.

DAVIS: So, Choon-yi may help the community to view the lives of workers or women differently, but that power to point to problems is tempered because she does not meet traditional expectations?

YEE: Yes, she is certainly outside traditional boundaries. But, I'm not sure that women of the time would see her as a positive role model because they would prefer to be fully-abled and to have other kinds of privileges. I don't think they'd be necessarily interested in her courage. Nor would they see her talent as a virtue. What can you do with painting? It's a hard living. I think it is very much tempered. Her gift is a very special talent that not every woman of that time would aspire to. When contemporary readers come to the story, I would hope that they would think that it's okay to be different, whether in regard to disability or race.

DAVIS: In a lot of your work, the main character rebels against or breaks with tradition (e.g. "Ginger for the Heart," *Roses, Breakaway, Curses*). Even Choon-yi, who travels on her own from China to North America, is breaking tradition for women. She is also breaking tradition in making money for her family. Do you see these breaks or transgressions as ultimately salutary for a community?

YEE: Absolutely. People need to question tradition and when confronted with crisis they should take the more courageous step of challenging a tradition rather than perpetuating it. And it's the courage that it takes that really intrigues me most. It's easy to *talk* about challenging tradition, but it's not easy to do it because the weight of the family is so powerful. We come from a culture where independent thinking is not encouraged. Traditional Chinese Confucian thought was very status-quo oriented: know your place; stay in that place; don't rock the boat. So, I think it takes enormous willpower to break out of that pattern of thinking, because everybody around you, especially the family, is saying, "Cool it! What's all the fuss?"

DAVIS: So, do you see Choon-Yi, then, as being special in that respect — she transgresses customs, but she is allowed to because she has only one arm?

YEE: Yes, because I think allowances are made for people who are marginalized in a major way. Society seems to allow them a bit more latitude. This is probably what gets her out to the New World, whereas in "Spirits of the Railway," it's easier for the son to just come over and look for his father. There's no question that it's the right thing for him to do. But, in this case, considering the history, there needed to be extra circumstances to make the quest viable.

DAVIS: Harvey Chan sets *Ghost Train* and *Roses* in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. Is that how you envisioned it?

YEE: Yes, all of my stories are about the pioneering days when the first generation came over.

DAVIS: When did the first generation come over?

YEE: Chinese immigration starts in 1858 with the Gold Rush and then the railway period is in the 1880s and there are numerous frontier industries (like shingle mills) where the Chinese were used on the West coast.

DAVIS: In your own research, what did you uncover about the way of life?

YEE: Very little. Social history is hard to track down because the lives of the common people are very rarely documented. I think I got more from my aunt, who wasn't a storyteller but who used survival tips to teach me how to grow up. They would be tips like "when you go into the forest, never be the leader because you never know what can happen. And don't be the last one in the line either." So, from these tales I sensed that for the Chinese the world was perceived as very dangerous. When I was a child, my aunt would say to me, "Now if anything happens, this is where you run to," and she would name a store or café — places marked as safe havens; "You run in there and phone home." This was the secondary way I learned about growing up in Canada: it was a highly threatened, fragile environment in which you come up with little rules to help you survive.

DAVIS: So, she saw the world as a forest essentially.

YEE: Yes, it's the garrison mentality Atwood talks about — it was very real to the Chinese. My aunt was a woman who thought the purpose of growing up was not to rock the boat. "The Chinese have little power in this society and they will never have power, so don't get too uppity!" Be proud, but follow the rules. I think she gave me the survival techniques for the wrong generation because by the time I came to her she was in her 60s.

DAVIS: How old were you?

YEE: I was about two or three. It was like being raised by grandparents a generation or two removed from current reality — a time of prosperity and changing expectations. She had a different construction of the world based on growing up in the 1910s and '20s. It was much more vicious.

DAVIS: Was she surprised by your being politicized, or frightened by it?

YEE: By that time, my aunt had let go. I think she thought, "Paul has gone to university; he can take care of himself; and so my job is done." I don't think she ever understood what I was doing at the archives. She knew I was involved in Chinatown, and she thought that was good because she had made it a mission in her life to make sure that I spoke Chinese. As children, my brother and I were forbidden to speak English at home even though she spoke fluent English and the English radio was on all the time. But the rule was that when you came into the house, you spoke Chinese. Conveniently, I can speak decent Cantonese now. She was proud to be Chinese; she wanted us to hold our heads high.

DAVIS: I'm wondering if you could comment on the parent figures in your

work. It's not uncommon for parents to be tyrannical in fairy tales, but it seems that even in your young-adult fiction, the parents are strong and oppressive. Are you aiming for historical accuracy, something like mythical weight, or maybe simply reader sympathy in this portrayal?

YEE: It's probably a little of everything. I am aware that the community I come from was historically a system where male power was supreme in the most horrifying ways. I certainly saw that in the families I grew up in where, for example, my uncle had more than one wife and that led to a number of problems within our family. The other thing about the patriarchy in China was that you would have these strong, silent father figures who were all-powerful but never communicative. They were strict, authoritarian figures whereas the mother was usually the loving, emotional side. Part of that was brought over here and certainly in my family I could see that. But I think someone who grows up here looks to that kind of family and then looks at what we see on TV where there are smiling, confidante-type fathers, and wonders, "what's going on here? Mine is not a nice family." So, what I'm doing with these patriarchal fathers is saying that I don't approve of them because the order that they set up was unequal and unjust and hard. It was hard on a huge number of people, including sons — until sons grew older and became like their fathers and perpetuated that cycle.

DAVIS: Do you see yourself as having portrayed that? I can't think of any story in which the son grows up having perpetuated what the father has done.

YEE: No, because in most of my work the characters break away from tradition. People who carry it on would be villains to me. So, this is sort of the sociological background of my answer to your question. When it comes to the oppressive parents, my portrayal of them may have more to do with trying to achieve mythical weight. I think in the West, we are coming to understand that parent-child relationships are key to understanding who we are as adults and that's a very recent phenomenon.

DAVIS: I wonder why many of your characters have to reconcile themselves to their *fathers* — Kwok in *Breakaway* tries. Lillian [*Curses of Third Uncle*] goes in search of her father, as does Choon-yi of *Ghost Train* in a kind of female Telemachan journey. Even though they search after their fathers or seek their approval, the characters often find out more about themselves, or that they are not like their fathers.

YEE: Much to my relief! I don't think the patriarchal father is the ideal we should be striving after. The inherent relationship between parent and child that we all hold holy is the strong propelling force that moves characters into action — whether they understand it or not. Duty and obligation to parents are very important in the Chinese setting. Duty overrides love. Obligation overrides love.

DAVIS: It seems that you are very mistrustful of people who hold power, and power is often rendered in patriarchal terms: it's usually men who hold it and miswield it.

YEE: Yes. To use someone else's truism, I believe that absolute power corrupts

absolutely. There haven't been many examples throughout human history of people using power wisely in favour of the dispossessed and marginalized. Power has tended to benefit those who are in power, and since I am not one of those people, I tend to question it. So that even when we strive for power, as middle-class yuppies are doing now, I think we need to be cognizant of what the system they are buying into is really all about and to assume some sort of critical standpoint.

DAVIS: Speaking of yuppies and economic power, one of the things that interested me in your fiction was how the acquisition of money is associated with happiness. In "Rider Chan," for instance, the mother dies happily because she gets some gold.

YEE: The whole reason for Chinese immigration was materialistic. So, our whole experience was guided by that one drive: to make money and to send money home. We didn't come here seeking freedom from political oppression or to settle the land. This still resonates with Chinese immigrants today who continue to seek material security according to Western standards.

DAVIS: That's interesting because in the European tradition wealth is associated with happiness in such tales as "Hansel and Gretel," where the children bring home jewels at the end. But to many children, that tale and its ethos seem long ago and far away, whereas your tales seem more recent.

YEE: That's because today's Chinese community in Canada is predominantly one of immigrants. Even though several tens of thousand Chinese have been here since 1858, today's global migration patterns are such that Hong Kong, China and Taiwan have been the top source countries of Canada's newcomers for the past several years. Many immigrants can't speak English and can't find work comparable to what they had before immigration. So every time I walk into a store in Chinatown and see people working behind meat counters and doing menial service work, I think about how these people have probably swallowed a lot to move from Hong Kong or Taiwan where they did better kinds of work. That quest for security is not long ago and far away; it still propels immigration today.

DAVIS: I wonder if the confusion about where "home" is in your work is related to that quest for security? Characters don't fit or belong anywhere, or "home" as a physical locale is often the scene of tension and difficulty, not domestic happiness — it's often where the terms of what home means are worked out. For example, at the end of "Prairie Widow" the mother decides that she will stay in Canada, but she has been vacillating between the two places — China and Canada — in her mind. Is that the condition of exile — not knowing where your home is, or having to find a snug place for yourself in an attitude or even a small bedroom inside a home?

YEE: Because I'm not an immigrant, I'm not sure I have ever been in that position of not knowing where I belong. I think first-generation immigrants go through enormous difficulties in trying to decide whether to stay or go home — "Do I sacrifice my life for the children because the children are here?" To give up everything that you know — neighbourhood, language, friends, workplace — in order to start again somewhere else is a huge step to take. You go from being

an insider to becoming an outsider. And it's harder for immigrants who are racial minorities because their visibility can last several generations. The idea of belonging or not belonging is still relevant to me (even though I'm a third-generation Canadian) because I look different. If I go to Halifax, I'm an outsider! [laughter] It's not like being in Vancouver. That's when questions of home come up. Home and belonging are intrinsically related. What you are talking about is finding a place where you feel you belong, are safe, and in control. It can be in your bedroom; it can be in your head; it can be in your garden. That's very personal. If I were to extrapolate I think I would say it would be healthy if more people went through that struggle instead of just avoiding the question, because you have to search your soul about why you are doing this and what society means.

DAVIS: You seem to push your characters toward struggle and almost toward crises of identity. Kwok, for example, wants to be on a soccer team with his white schoolmates, but ends up playing for a Chinese team. But he only inadvertently discovers that he *does* have a sense of belonging with the Chinese.

YEE: It's because the search for belonging is not encouraged by anybody. What's to gain from it? You can sleep better at night?! [laughter] Both Lillian and Kwok were written as realistically as possible. In real life, no one goes on those quests unless you are really forced to. There has to be a strong motivator to push people into the search or the quest. Hence the crisis. The quest for identity is not a natural part of any society, except for marginalized groups and within those groups where you have marginalized people in crisis.

DAVIS: Your characters tend to go out on those quests all alone. In fact, your fiction doesn't include many helper figures, and this is a little unusual for children's and YA lit. By helper figures, I mean people such as supportive adults or people, even animals, with magic powers who understand and assist the protagonist. Why are they relatively absent in your work?

YEE: That probably has to do with my own upbringing. Orphans often feel abandoned by their parents, whether true or not. Growing up as an orphan, I felt that I had been abandoned by my parents. The ones who should have been taking care of me had instead gone and died on me!! [laughter] So, I think that set me up as someone who said, "Well, I am going to take care of myself. You can't trust adults." When I was a child, my Aunt Lillian was clear about it. She would say, "Make no doubt about it. *You* are an orphan. You are *not* like other children. Don't ever assume you are like any other child because *you* don't have any parents." Real parents stand behind their children and help them. So, my aunt wanted me to be extremely self-reliant. And that firmed up my sense that you have to take care of yourself (and my caregiver affirmed that: "I'm here but don't take anything for granted"). So, it's a very personal thing. Orphans often feel no one understands them. Not only am I an orphan, a racial minority, I was poor, and I came from a dysfunctional family! My aunt believed in this "tough love" way of raising children. So, I figured, "Oh, Nobody knows the burdens I carry!" [laughter] And I became a loner. So, that's why in my fiction there are no helper

figures. When I was a kid, I didn't get a lot of help. (I'm sure I got help; it's just that I didn't feel that I got the kind of help that other kids were getting.)

DAVIS: But your characters don't come across as self-pitying: they go out on their own and keep their feelings to themselves. Cariboo Wing only helps bring out in Lillian what she already has within her.

YEE: That's probably a reflection of who I am, too. The other influence was that with my first book, *Skyfighter*, the publisher, Lorimer, was very clear on what they wanted. The story had to be non-ageist, non-sexist, non-racist and any villains had to have a social explanation for why they were bad. And children had to solve the situations; adults couldn't step in and save the day: that was one of the rules I was given. Lorimer wanted to see the empowering of children in difficult situations, and I guess I could relate to that. Lorimer's politics were progressive, so I didn't mind. *Curses* was also done for Lorimer, so I think they may have had an influence on me.

DAVIS: But your characters have a kind of individualism that is achieved, paradoxically, in community — through their connections with others.

YEE: I think that's important because that's how I became individualized, if you will. Being involved with the community drew me out and gave me everything that I write with. If I had missed connecting with the community, I wouldn't be writing at all.

DAVIS: Another thing I've noticed about your work is that you don't tell your reader what characters look like physically — except the bosses, who are usually repulsive. Typically, in folk and fairy tales, what someone looks like is a reflection of inner character. Does appearance have no currency in your world?

YEE: I think that has to do with the way I was brought up. I grew up in a very poor household; consequently, I wore patched-up hand-me-downs and sweaters my aunt would knit from leftover yarn. If I ever complained that other children were laughing at me, she would say, "*it doesn't matter what you look like on the outside; what matters is what is on the inside.*" No matter how hard I screamed, she stuck to this one phrase! Annoying as it was, it stayed with me. As well, it comes down to the point that we ought not to judge people by what they look like because that can be a racial issue and a class issue. When we see people begging in the streets, we make lots of assumptions about them. That's not different from making assumptions based on the colour of people's skin. So, I guess it's those two things: my aunt saying the inner self is more important than the outer self, and then the issue of appearance and race. I suppose it's also a bit of individualism on my part. Marketing dictates how we are supposed to dress, and so we become concerned with the right labels. I'm amazed with children who insist on having a Club Monaco t-shirt. It scares me a bit because it suggests that they are not as individualized as they might think they are — that somehow they are seeking security in looking alike. It seems to be the wrong place to find that security: it has to come from the inside.

DAVIS: Do you think it's conscious that you don't describe your characters?

Some writers say they want to leave it up to the reader's imagination. Or is it an ethic so ingrained in you that you don't register what your characters look like? **YEE:** I am not conscious of it at all! Sometimes my editors tell me, "You need to do more description, Paul! We don't have enough sense of what these people look like." The third point on this issue is that when I was a child, I was plot-oriented. I would read dialogue, but not the descriptive passages! Consequently, I may not have the skills to write description. It's a horrible habit to have when you want to be a writer! Whenever I read a review of a contemporary writer and the reviewer waxes eloquently on the writer's lyrical style, I think, "Oh, I've got a lot of catch-up work to do!" [laughter]

DAVIS: Do you sometimes get impatient with reviewers of your work who tend to overlook its literary qualities and foreground its cultural or anthropological value? This is something Tom King has discussed — that is, how people expect anthropology from Native literature and tend to forget about the literary and imaginative qualities of the works.

YEE: I've just read King's *Medicine River* and I thought it was a wonderful book — funny, touching, real in the sense of characters and inherited history. I thought it was very literary, but much more. More in the sense that the book takes us into King's vision of a Native community. It's exposing readers to people and characters they wouldn't ordinarily encounter. I've always written with community in mind. My writing is part of a process of learning from the community and becoming a much more confident person through it. If I become a better person from my interaction with all those people and their histories, then how do I give something back? My books have to do some social good for the community.

DAVIS: So, you're happy that people will not only be entertained by your work but also learn something from it, or be inspired by it?

YEE: Yes, it's not just entertainment. If people can read and understand from, say, *Roses Sing on New Snow*, that the Chinese culture was patriarchal and one of horrifying male dominance, that's useful. I don't mind if people bring anthropological interest to it because any piece of literature will teach you about a different culture. For people who are writing from the margins, it's part of the burden we carry. When people aren't familiar with the culture you come from, you have to explain it.

DAVIS: How do you feel about someone, like me, who is not Chinese, teaching your work and talking about what you have had to say? Does the issue of appropriation of your stories disturb you?

YEE: No. Storytellers have asked if they can tell my stories in storytelling circles and I've always said "fine." My position is that a writer creates stories and they go out into the world in many kinds of ways — through books and storytelling, and teaching is just another way. I think the more discussion and analysis there is, the higher the levels of consciousness get, even for me.

DAVIS: What is your opinion about works such as *Chin Chiang and the Dragon's Dance*? Does such a work exoticize and/or misrepresent Vancouver's

Chinatown and Chinese culture? It offers a very different picture of Chinatown than your own work.

YEE: When *Chin Chiang and the Dragon's Dance* came out, I had a really adverse reaction to it. Maybe it was because *Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter* had just come out at about the same time and I was chewing sour grapes because *Chin Chiang* was receiving all the glowing reviews. But several things bothered me about it. First, there were the inaccuracies around the setting, culture and people. Right from the first page, Chinese Canadians will pick up hints of inauthenticity. Paper lanterns shaped like fish and birds aren't part of the New Year's festivities; they're part of the mid-autumn festival. The dragon head is extremely heavy and a grandfather would never be asked to "dance" it. The dragon's tail requires a very strong man to hold the tail back so the coils of the dragon don't collapse into each other from the momentum of the running. And an old woman could never have run in a dragon dance in her youth (if she did, that would be a story of its own). And what is this "dancing" that the old woman and Chin Chiang practice on the roof? The dragon is run through the streets by twenty or thirty carriers who make the dragon's serpent-like body twist and turn and coil. They don't do fancy kung-fu steps with their feet. So the dragon dance, which is the central vehicle to the story, isn't quite right.

Secondly, I wasn't sure if this was meant to be a realistic story or a largely symbolic portrayal. The paintings lean towards an extremely realistic portrayal of contemporary Vancouver's Chinatown in their depiction of local streets, signage and buildings. Even the details around the dragon are very faithfully rendered. The artwork is really impressive. However, the people don't share in that realism. The adults in the street, for example, speak rather stiltedly about the dragon and how he brings prosperity. Chinese-Canadian people don't speak like that. And the story certainly isn't realistic. I grew up in Chinatown, and kids never wanted to be in the parades and festivities of Chinatown. Kids don't want to be seen to be part of that; they'd rather be playing hockey, watching TV or doing other mainstream things.

Then there's the story. It's pat and easy: a boy in crisis runs away, meets someone who gives him confidence, and then his life is okay. In my mind, that crisis had to be linked to not liking himself, because I would argue that is the great crisis for racial minority kids — being different. I was speaking at a conference once, and someone in the audience challenged me on this. She said the story was a very simple and charming tale about how a child conquers his fears. But when I read the story, fear was hardly one of the key emotions the boy was feeling. What was Chin Chiang afraid of? What was he running from? To me, if the story was set in Vancouver's Chinatown, then the issue had to relate somehow to the reality of being in Canada. Otherwise, why didn't Wallace just set his story in Hong Kong or China, where the minority status of the Chinese community wouldn't be a consideration?

So, yes, Wallace *does* offer a very different picture of Chinatown than that offered in my work. He's an outsider to the community and its everyday life and concerns. His focus on the dragon (as something so totally colourful and different and awesome) exoticizes the community and emphasizes things that are more

appealing to outsiders than insiders. I doubt the book rings true for Chinese-Canadian kids, although other people may find the illustrations too pretty to resist.

DAVIS: So, are you disturbed, then, about appropriation of voice with respect to *Chin Chiang* or simply cultural and historical misrepresentation?

YEE: I'm more concerned about misrepresentation. If writers take the time and energy to consult meaningfully with the community they're writing about, and ensure the community's integrity is respected, something valuable or interesting might emerge. It's when they take one or two images or impressions of the community and want to run with them that it could be troublesome because those images and impressions invariably have a huge overlay of historical and cultural considerations that are specific and important to the community in subjective and perhaps non-documented ways.

DAVIS: Do you see yourself as politicizing a whole new generation of Canadians, as Joy Kogawa did?

YEE: Well, there's a whole new generation of Chinese-Canadian writers coming up who have not grown up under the dark cloud that I did. My aunt's cloud was one shaped by a much darker period of history. The newest generation of Chinese-Canadian writers grew up with a different sense of opportunities than mine and so their writing is different. Some don't have the political connections to the community that I had which drove my life for a decade or so.

DAVIS: Are the ghosts in your fiction related to that dark cloud?

YEE: Ghosts represent a very powerful force in my life. My aunt believed in ghosts and I grew up in great fear of them. I was scared of the dark and I was afraid to be alone. I think orphans live with more fears than other children because a huge blanket of security was taken away from them. So living with fear has always been part of my life and writing about ghosts is one way I'm trying to understand the power of fear, and what it can drive us to do or not do.

DAVIS: I'm wondering about your preoccupation with the margin between life and final rest, and with the issue of transporting souls home. It has occurred in at least three of your pieces. Is it personal or racial?

YEE: It's racial to the degree that the early Chinese who came here didn't think their stay would be permanent. They were coming here for work and if they happened to die here, they fully expected their bones to be sent home to China. They were sojourners not settlers, and that skewed their behaviour and expectations about life here. And it's racial to the extent that the Chinese who might have wanted to stay here were made to feel unwelcome and that probably increased the degree to which this custom perpetuated itself — "We don't really belong here. They don't want us here. Why would we stay?" Is it personal? No, because Canada is home; my parents were buried here.

DAVIS: You were orphaned early in life and I wonder about your own ghosts in relation to that.

YEE: I've made a conscious effort to establish my parental figures as Canadian figures. Whatever life they led was here in Canada. My mother *chose* to come here

after the revolution in China. I don't think going back was an option for them.

I have gone back to China and visited the tomb of my great grandparents, but it was more ritualistic than personal. I was more of an observer watching myself do that. I don't think of China as the place where I'll find my roots. I would prefer to search for souls here in Canada.

DAVIS: Do you see your work as having a utopian impulse, or revolutionary one? (You often envision struggles against injustice and cruelty.)

YEE: I am looking for a better world, either in the historical context, or today. Things can be made better. There should be global justice. So, it is utopian to the degree that I want things to be better. I don't see it as revolutionary because the implication of revolution is that you tear down one structure and replace it with another. And I, for a whole number of reasons, don't have a strong inclination toward revolution at this point in my life (I may have years ago!). When you look at North American society, it isn't that bad, all things considered. It allows for a certain amount of dissent and mobility. It's not a perfect society, but it seems to have strong enough foundations to allow for challenges calling for change. So, I'm not sure that when I write about the New World, I would call for repudiation of the values on which North American society is based. More personally, when I look at what China's Revolution has done, I see mixed things. On the one hand, since 1949, education has soared and health care has gotten better. But on the other hand, horrible things happened through the misuse of power. I mean, look at the Tiananmen massacre. If I had grown up in China, I would have suffered horribly during the Cultural Revolution. So, the idea of revolution is not appealing to me. The idea of tearing down something leads to chaos. Certainly, the way I was raised was to respect authority and not to rock the boat, and to have faith in the society that you are in. But that's not a totally *passive* position, because the society itself encourages improvement (in North America it does, anyway). So, it doesn't feel right to me to use revolutionary language.

DAVIS: Would that explain why you seem to test the Old World hierarchical system that is patriarchal and conservative, but you don't reconstitute it? Maylin implicitly questions the system but she doesn't overthrow the patriarchy. Lee Jim [in "The Iron Chink"] doesn't start a revolution against worker exploitation. So, you don't fundamentally alter the social relations and work ethos.

YEE: I suppose the long-term interests of Maylin and Lee Jim are best served in the kind of society that they are living in, even though at that time it's a struggle. Ultimately, unions will form, capitalism evolves into a more moderate system, and women get equal rights. Lee Jim gets a very bittersweet moment of satisfaction — at that time, that's all you could have: moments that are short and triumphant.

DAVIS: But you are communicating a sense of what is right and wrong in the existing power structure?

YEE: Yes, because I think that power structure can be reformed. So I believe in hope, especially when right and wrong are clearly known. I like to think that hope was historically important, that it was one of those survival strategies. No

matter how bad your individual situation, if you believed that in the long run your sacrifice and struggle would benefit your family or your community, then the bad times may have become slightly more bearable.

I guess my fiction is a kind of backward way of thanking people for sacrificing and going through difficult times.

NOTES

1. This interview is based on discussions with Paul Yee in the fall of 1995 and the summer of 1996.

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Teach Me to Fly, Skyfighter! And Other Stories. Illus. Sky Lee. Toronto: James Lorimer & Co., 1983.

"Prairie Widow." *New: West Coast Fiction*. Vancouver: Pulp Press, 1984.

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Ghost Train. Illus. Harvey Chan. Vancouver/Toronto/Buffalo: Groundwood, 1996.

AWARDS

Nominated for 1986 BC Book Prize for *The Curses of Third Uncle*.

Nominated for 1988 BC Book Prize for *Saltwater City*.

1989 Vancouver Book Prize for *Saltwater City*.

Nominated for 1990 Mister Christie Book Award for *Tales from Gold Mountain*.

Nominated for 1990 Ruth Schwartz Children's Book Award for *Tales from Gold Mountain*.

1990 IODE Violet Downey Book Award for *Tales from Gold Mountain*.

1990 Sheila A. Egoff Children's Book Prize for *Tales from Gold Mountain*.

1992 Ruth Schwartz Children's Book Award for *Roses Sing on New Snow*.

1996 Governor General's Award for *Ghost Train*.

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