

# RICE PAPER

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

"Where are you really from?" I wonder how many Asian Canadians have heard *that* question.

The folks involved with *RicePaper* today are committed to telling Asian Canadian stories and reclaiming ugly racial stereotypes in a cheeky, ironic way. Take, our most recent cover for instance: "A slanted point of view" and "Yellow Revolution."

Our ultimate goal is to change the consciousness of our nation by documenting untold immigrant stories and personal accounts of epiphanies and watershed moments; streams of consciousness, memories of childhood and racial discrimination.

*RicePaper* began initially as a newsletter for the community of the Asian Canadian Writers Workshop in the 1980s. The ACWW's genesis can be traced back to 1968 when a group of friends—community organizers and activists—informally networked and met to discuss their perspectives on identity and the voiceless state of Asians in Canada.

Hardly anything in Canadian literature, school history texts, the arts and mass media affirmed their Asian Canadian identity. So they started scribing their respective bi-cultural experiences in poetry, novels and other creative expressions. Award-winning authors such as SKY Lee, Paul Yee and Fred Wah emerged from this group. As did an award-winning radio program called Pender Guy, noted foremost for an investigative piece on racist business policy in clubs.

*RicePaper's* next step is in facilitating more pioneering community work in Canada.

"You see things and ask, 'Why?' and I dream things that never were and say, 'Why not?' —  
*George Bernard Shaw*

*Sylvia Yu*

# RICE PAPER

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(under construction)

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# DURIAN LOVE

in chinatown  
stores are disemboweled  
onto the sidewalk.  
it's all part of  
the medieval produce  
torture technique  
to attracts tourists & rats.

BY JEN LAM

already late for a date  
I miss my bus as a result of  
bartering away minutes to  
meditate in windows  
& watch fishmongers scale  
the ocean's birth,  
their hands left  
diamond plated by their work.

dragons everywhere  
climbing up voices  
jockeying for altitude  
then sliding down the slope of sighs  
at the end of every sentence.

sun sein lichee ah!  
ho liang ah!

above shanghai squats in  
buried balconies of chore.  
from the rims of rooftops  
hang  
a deeper degree of ghosts.  
inside  
stairs of narrow grinning tread  
lead up to rooms crackling  
with the smell of old politics.

pender guy will teach you  
durian love.  
extreme hunger that  
will repulse cannibals.  
a love that  
will have you forced outdoors  
& banned from subways.  
will lead your tongue  
to abandon  
the crisp clean sex of apples to  
romance the fruit of porcupine lust  
decaying in the boys' locker room.

# COTTON FREE

---

BY JEN LAM  
FOR BRANDON

I knew him even before  
he was born.  
saw him bring summer  
to his mother's skin of winter ashes.  
he grew fighting for every inch  
threatening to split her in half  
from the inside out.  
I used to hold him for hours  
gazing at this 8 lb 13 ounce universe  
thinking how could something that's  
always pissing & puking on itself  
smell so good?

from him I've learned to  
swallow happiness without suspicions.  
that bliss is the color of taking  
the whole crayon box  
all 64 meanings of laughter  
into your hands & scribbling all over  
the grey monday faces of strangers  
until there is nothing left  
but paper shells.

we hid in closets crunching rolls  
of wintergreen lifesavers  
& I taught him about the  
electricity flooding his jaw.

now under  
the sun's warm chanting  
we walk down commercial drive  
my hand lost in  
his atmosphere of tornado curls

# ORANGE JUICE

---

sharing a bottle of root beer  
& curdling the air  
with our funky brown belching contest.  
who would've thought that such  
a little body could hold so much gas?

we go to safeway  
to get oreos  
& chocolate covered jujubes  
& oj  
*no gunk* he says  
& proceeds to tell me that  
*orange juice is the best because  
spiderman drinks it  
so you ought to have it always  
except after brushing your teeth  
then it tastes like toad piss.*

frankly, I think this is just his  
round about attempt at  
trying to get out of having  
to brush his teeth.

the supermarket is tepid  
with housewives escaping  
their beer maddened husbands  
& sugar infested kids.  
young women filling up  
on a week's supply of  
pre-prepared  
low cal  
processed life.  
& men  
old & young

unchaperoned  
wandering about shell-shocked  
as a flock of xylophones serenades us  
with saccharin flashbacks of the 80's.

armed with oreos  
chocolate covered jujubes  
& cotton free oj  
we head to the express lane.  
& wait in line with the  
rest of the lemmings  
where this woman  
crammed into a navy suit  
her face stuffed with death  
standing in front of the  
candy display whips around  
& snarls

*what do you think you're doing?  
I was in line. I'm in front of you.*

& brandon beside me  
spinning himself into the ground  
round  
& round  
& round  
until he is a puddle of giggles  
splashing me with his giddiness.  
what could I do but step back  
& let the bitch into line.  
she obviously needed  
the small victory  
more than I did.

BY LARISSA LAI

**T**he year 1990 seemed to signal a change in the way the people talked about race. I can never be sure if this shift was public or personal, but I felt an excitement in the air. Young people of colour—young Asian Canadians, in particular—sensed that something was about to happen. It was something we could not describe, but it nonetheless captivated our energy and our enthusiasm.

I had been in touch with Jim Wong-Chu of the Asian Canadian Writers Workshop since 1986 about an anthology of Chinese Canadian poetry that would later become *Many-Mouthed Birds*. I was interested in the project the same way I've always been dutifully interested in all things related to my Chinese heritage and North American identity. But I didn't think of it in terms of a larger movement or a larger historical moment. It was just a book which might or might not get published.

In the spring of 1990, at the launch of SKY Lee's book *Disappearing Moon Café*, I found a community abuzz with an excitement I had never experienced before. It was there I first met Paul Wong and Elspeth Sage. They were putting together an exhibit of film, video and photo-based work called *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*. Jim told me they were looking for an assistant curator. Again, I was interested, but saw it as little more than a summer job.

#### ROMANCE

One month in, I realized I was part of an odd, but very exciting, community romance. Fraught with anger, suspicion and jealousy, there was a burning desire and will to create a new world, unlike any we had grown up in.

We upped our noodle intake. Some of us wore *meen naps* and *kung fu* shoes. For the first time in our lives, we had the space and sanction to talk about all the truths about race and racism that we, as citizens of a Multicultural Canada, were compelled to keep inside.

We spent hours making up smart-ass answers to the ubiquitous question, "Where are you from?" We talked about interracial relationships. We talked about exoticism. We talked about the Asianphiles who, Paul writes, "festoon themselves with curios and trinkets of an imperial past." We knew the emperor had no clothes, and his stupid nakedness delighted us. It didn't matter whether race categories were natural or constructed. We had been mistreated and abused by whites, and reclaimed "Asianness" to empower ourselves.

But the romance had a darker underside. How liberating it was to look the monster in the eye, but it was also frightening and sad to admit the monster existed. We had always turned to whites for love and approval. Now we turned

to one another, but we didn't always like what we saw. We did not necessarily have the tools to support each other, having little or no experience in the past. We had, in fact, often seen one another as competitors for white attention.

I had hoped to talk about this tension at the *Writing Thru Race* conference, held four years later. But this hope, as usual, was hijacked by a white agenda that insisted we look at its hurt and its fury and deny our own.

Still, we had begun a journey of community construction in reaction to white racism. Our reclamation, complete with chopstick font, had a decidedly ironic twist because we could see from both inside and outside of the white gaze.

#### ARTWORK

It is a fitting coincidence we begin at the borderlands. Taki Bluesinger's *The Beginning of the East*, which appears between the artists' section and the writers' section in the catalogue, questions what we mean by "Asian." It points to the fluidity of any definition of race. The image of a man with a cigarette in his mouth was apparently taken in the Gobi desert. But are his features Chinese? Or Middle Eastern?

Several of the pieces presented family and community histories missing in the media. Sharyn Yuen's *Jook Kaak*, made from old family photos and handmade paper with handwritten text, challenges the way we look at history. The ancientness of the photographs contrasts sharply with the immediacy of the text. "The intensity of the moment was overwhelming. It lasted all of 45 minutes." We understand at once the huge gap in time, space and longing between the China side of the family and the Canada side. At the same time, it resists being seen as an artifact of a time long past, of a culture long dead. It demands we rethink our understanding of our history as dead, and assimilation as effective. Midi Onodera's video *Displaced View* also insists on its own subjectivity. The untranslated parts in Japanese show the frustration and loss a *sansei* child feels with her grandmother, while still holding non-Japanese viewers at arm's length.

Other work had differing approaches. Jin-me Yoon's piece criticizes the western tendency to collect and categorize everything, and how fragmenting it can be for those whose lives are collected and categorized. It portrays the official immigration process as a collection and categorization of bodies, flattening complex lives into photographs and bureaucratic jargon, at the same moment they become citizens.

# REVISITED

## YELLOW PERIL: REVISITED

Henry Tsang's piece pokes at pop wisdom about race and desire by reflecting both the wisdom and the naïveté of discussions around interracial romance.

### STRATEGY

*Yellow Peril* was consciously confrontational. It challenged the predominantly white, middle-class nature of artist-run centres. The question of racism was central. Paul Wong writes, "It is a racist practice to judge marginalized work and new ideas which have never been given the opportunity to evolve. When confronted by work that is different, we don't understand because we don't know how to see. When viewing work that is critical of the dominant culture, we get offended because it is about us."

In retrospect, I think we missed a great opportunity to talk about the actual artwork, in a critical sense, even though some artists strongly encouraged it. At the end of his catalogue essay, Richard Fung writes, "Whatever formal strategies Asian film or video makers choose, we need to situate and question ourselves as subjects. Not how we are seen, but how we see. We must center our work on our own problems, desires and foibles."

If anything, progressive people of all races were reluctant to critique the work for fear of being labelled racist. I say this very cautiously because, I understand the danger of such a statement. There was plenty of very destructive critique coming from the reactionary right which polarized the debates. Critique coming from the progressive side of the fence could have been used "against us."

In the United States, for example, Kobena Mercer retracted a review about the white gaze in Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic images of black men when he realized his critique was being used by some of the "homophobic right" to shut Mapplethorpe down. I deeply believe we need critique to build a movement, but I don't know how to solve this quandary. I only know it was a tension then, and it is a tension now. I also strongly resent the polarization of the debate because, by framing our struggle as white versus colour, any differences among artists of colour are quickly swept under the rug.

### PROGENY

Community organizers and curators did find ways to continue the discussion. *Self Not Whole*, organized by Henry Tsang and Lorraine Chan, exhibited Asian Canadian visual art and writing at the Chinese Cultural Centre in Vancouver. It might be an over-generalization to say the CCC in Chinatown tends to look to Asia for its art, but it was nonetheless a radical move to bring in contemporary work by Chinese Canadian artists. *Self Not Whole* tried to throw open the question of what we mean by "Chinese," "Canadian," "self" and "community." It points to the varied backgrounds and experiences of the artists and organizers—as well

## YELLOW PERIL: REVISITED

the venue itself—to suggest that these categories are by no means stable. To live in the hyphen of "Chinese-Canadian" is to live in a constant state of flux, to be without a resting place, without a homeplace, constantly in motion and constantly in question. *Self Not Whole* was more philosophically sophisticated than *Yellow Peril*, but it may not have happened at all had *Yellow Peril* not come first.

Similarly, two projects—*Memory and Desire* (1992) and *Racy Sexy* (1993)—engaged questions that arose organically from earlier race-focused work. *Memory and Desire* came on the heels of a Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition of British South Asian photography called *Fabled Territories*, curated by Sunil Gupta. *Memory and Desire* was largely the result of protests by a group called Local Colour, which asked why the gallery did not look to the local South Asian community for critical work by people of colour.

The content of *Memory and Desire*, however, was more evocative than confrontational. Engaging myth and family, clothing and old photographs, the women who took part in this exhibit identified themselves as "women of culture"—steering the focus away from race essentialism. It insisted on and laid out some of the complexities of lives lived here in Vancouver. Rather than taking aim at white oppression, it focused on the mapping of history.

Organizers of *Racy Sexy* also chose what they called "a universal human emotion"—desire—as the focus for its show, as it intersects with questions about race and identity. Karin Lee and Henry Tsang write, "What are our ideas of beauty and how are we influenced by media images? With whom do we identify and why? How and why does our desire differ from others? Were experiences common in different communities, and with those of different culture, class and sexual backgrounds? Finally, how did culture and race influence our sexuality, and vice versa?" They took a brave step by inviting members of other marginalized communities into the Chinese Cultural Centre, in conjunction with other community centres.

But *Racy Sexy* suffered painfully from unresolved differences among the organizers, and from lack of trust, which they had so little time to build. No one denied that the project was influenced by earlier work in Vancouver and Toronto, and spearheaded by gay and lesbian organizers of colour. But some felt this influence was not clearly articulated enough, or reflected in the make-up of the organizing committee or the festival program.

This problem was by no means a new one. Women in the Civil Rights movement in the '60s faced it. Black women in a white feminist movement faced it. This time, it was queers in an anti-racist movement. Discussion around the hierarchy of race oppression, and the problem of living at the intersection of two or more marginalizations, raised the question of the fragmentation of the self.

It pointed more sharply than ever to the social construction of identity categories. The strategic quality of race and other essentialisms were wearing thin.

## YELLOW PERIL: REVISITED

(And did we all really understand essentialism as merely a strategy, when our experiences of breaking the silence were so very real and empowering?) The "we" of this discussion is already crumbling. With these questions of identity thrown into contention from within, just as we were being bombarded by charges of "political correctness" and "censorship," it was getting harder to bond and organize. New tools were necessary, but what would they look like?

In 1995, Glen Alteen, Aiyana Maracle and Haruko Okano organized a project called *Half Bred* through the grunt gallery. It highlighted three special categories: bisexuality, miscegenation and transgender. I say special, because they were beyond fixed notions of identity. And yet they depended on the rhetoric of identity for their existence. When Mark Tadao Nakada speaks of having to raise his hand twice during an in-class racial census in grade school, or Ivan Elizabeth Coyote speaks of his perilous navigation through a series of identities (boy, girl, dyke, butch), the audience may be inspired by the honesty of the moment. But she may also be aware of the violence inherent within the empowerment of earlier moments, even as they set the stage for this one.

### WHERE NOW?

But where to go from here? I think it would be an excellent project to carefully revisit the individual works in these shows. In many ways, individual artists were more sophisticated than the curators or organizers of these exhibitions. They could be, precisely because they did not need a collective vision. This let them play with history and contradiction much more than the exhibitions could afford.

In retrospect, I have a great deal of admiration for the organizers of these various projects. Each was a brave step in furthering a community discourse, and each took risks in making these steps, and paid a price for doing so. Many of the people involved in these projects have moved away from organizing or dropped out of the picture altogether.

I am vaguely aware of another generation, not necessarily younger, rising up to organize events such as Vancouver's now annual Asian Heritage Month festival. Massive conservative backlash against the activities and organizing of the early '90s has largely forced a de-radicalization of the language we use to talk about race. I wonder what has become of all those heated and passionate discussions and arguments. Certainly they have not been resolved. Perhaps they are not resolvable. But I often find myself wishing that the solidarity created then, however tenuous, might find continuity somewhere. In this era of global capitalism, the need for them is more pressing than ever. Maybe solidarity does exist, but we do not yet understand its shape.

*Thanks to Roy Miki, Rita Wong and Debora O for their support and feedback on this piece. (RP)*

BY TETSURO SHIGEMATSU

**A**s a child, I had this reoccurring dream. I'd be standing in front of the mirror combing my hair, but staring back at me wasn't my own reflection. Instead, it was the Fonz staring back at me. Movement for movement we were in perfect sync. We were, in a word "perfectomundo." While having these dreams, not once did it ever strike me as odd to be seeing the face of Henry Winkler as my own. It was only when I woke up that I soon realized, "Hey! That wasn't me!" After analyzing this dream with my school friends at recess, I realized that I was not alone. They too had dreams of the Fonz.

Even back then, we realized this collective dream of ours was a thinly disguised wish. We may not have used that exact term, but we did acknowledge the mystery of our mutual connection through the observance of a simple yet resonant rite: with thumbs pointed skyward, we thrust our fists forward, while uttering that immortal syllable, "Aaaaaaay!"

We were intensely devout in the ceaseless repetition of this mantra. And who could blame us? Happy Days was a dominant part of our cultural universe and Arthur Fonzarelli embodied everything a young boy could ever hope to be.

The Fonz was cool, tough, charismatic, sexy. All the women loved him, and all the men wanted to be like him, including us. It was only much later in life that I realized this dream was peculiar on another level.

Looking back, I realized that the Fonz was king simply because he didn't have any competition. Certainly not from anyone who looked like me. Bruce Lee might have tied the Fonz in a fight — maybe, but only the Fonz could snap his fingers and have a bevy of co-eds leap into his arms.

Fu Man Chu, Charlie Chan, and the star of Kung Fu — all their noses looked pretty pointy to me. Probably the only authentic Asians I saw on TV were the sad expressions of two Asian boys. Their reflection would appear on the picture tube right after my mother turned off the television. I remember one night, my brother reached up and ran his fingers over the crackling static electricity of the dead screen and exclaimed, "Hey look, it's us!" In our pajamas we danced together before the TV set, laughing with delight at being able to see ourselves on TV. That night, I went to bed happy and dreamt I was the Fonz.

#### BOY'S EYE VIEW

Childhood experiences, fantasies and unfulfilled wishes infuse an artist's vision. My past writing has often been autobiographical, as I seek to communicate my particular vision and experience of the world from the vantage point of an Asian Canadian boy, growing up in a white working-class neighbourhood. The preceding story demonstrates many elements of my style of expression and communication. I create stories which provide a common ground, a place where the audi-

## VISIONS OF FONZIE

ence and I can explore various political, social and ethnic issues together.

More broadly speaking, I examine the dynamic interweaving of ethnic and cultural differences which shape and create Canadian identities. My work seeks to bring to the forefront the intersection of gender, race and sexuality and their impact on stereotypical icons of masculinity. The lack of Asian masculine icons within the Asian community encourages the perpetuation of destructive stereotypes, which the community then internalizes and begins to manifest.

As a storyteller, I offer up personal confusion for the edification of my community. It was on the basis of this reputation that I was asked to be a subject of a National Film Board documentary about the identity of Asian males. It had been nearly two decades since *Happy Days* had left the air. Now my long awaited chance to appear on the same screen where the Fonz had once strutted was at hand. I was ready. I was also eager to participate for less superficial reasons. For I felt as a male Asian artist I had a great deal to say.

But in an effort to sound articulate, seem intelligent, and be polite, I constantly censored myself during the interviews. When the director complimented me on the unusual amount of candor I had displayed relative to the other subjects, I realized that along with the other interviewees I was perhaps unwittingly playing out a role prescribed to us as Asian men: quiet, polite, passive, and unassertive (everything Fonzie was not).

Twenty years I had waited to see myself on TV and I blew it. I felt I had let myself down as well as those I was chosen to represent. Replaying the incident in my mind, I realized the alternate course of action. Speaking out, was unlikely. To give voice to the thoughts I had thus far held in reserve, I created an alter ego — a persona, someone who had the bravado to say the things I thought, and then go even further by taking action, someone who could take the risks I felt I could not. His name is Lee Hiroshima.

Lee is an extremely outspoken Asian performance artist who habitually alienates his predominantly white audience with angry socio-political diatribes. One night after a performance, he gets beaten up by skinheads — twice. Lee vows to have his revenge upon "The White Man" by founding a secret society of like-minded Asian brothers. Tapping into the hidden anger that many Asian men feel as a result of living in a white culture, Lee has no trouble attracting new recruits. The same qualities that prevent him from achieving commercial success as a performer, (overt hostility, fanaticism) enable him to be an extremely effective fire-brand. To lead them, Lee finds inspiration in the principles of *Bushido*, *The Way of the Samurai*, and *The Art of War*. He also develops a superficial attraction to the nation of Islam, for its militant racial stance and the discipline it engenders among the rank and file. Membership in his organization grows, and along with it the increas-

ingly violent nature of their exploits.

To further groom himself for ever expanding leadership demands, Lee courts an Iranian woman believing she can escort him into the palace of Islam, where he expects to find the spiritual resources he needs to carry out his campaign of vengeance. But Lee finds himself deeply affected by the teachings of the Koran and its vision of creating a just and equitable society.

In the course of his journey, Lee loses his thirst for revenge and his appetite for violence. Soon after, he gets kicked out of the very group he founded. The reins of leadership are passed on to one of his protégés and the movement takes on a life of its own. Despite having betrayed the movement, Lee finds contentment for the first time. He has found an even stronger sense of belonging within his adopted Iranian community.

During a typically wild celebration of No Rooz, the Iranian new year, Lee realizes that if we are to experience a collective renewal, we can no longer fixate on racial differences. He joins hands with two other "non-Asians" and begins to dance. However, in losing his anger Lee also loses his creative edge and consequently his ability to set logic on fire. For his latest performance, instead of his usual practice of alienating his audience with his version of the unalloyed truth, he presents a diluted version of his material to both popular and critical acclaim.

As commercial opportunities avail themselves, he decides to opt out altogether, as he no longer feels the need to be on stage. In effect he becomes artistically silent. As Lee plays with his Japanese-Iranian son, he feels he has made the right choice, but he ponders the personal cost of happiness and whether on some level he might've betrayed himself. Lee's character may be unique but his voyage is not.

All my stories of growing up as an Asian Canadian can be categorized as having taken place in one of three stages.

**Stage I Denial.** This stage is characterized by a subconscious desire to pass (as white) or the need to identify with the dominant culture at the expense of being ignorant about one's own origins.

**Stage II Militancy.** Characterized by self-righteous anger, the militant seeks to reinvent himself in opposition to a newly identified enemy.

**Stage III Tolerance.** Awareness of being unique is no less diminished, but it no longer serves to divide. Transcending the dichotomy of "the other," the person who has reached this stage is characterized by greater broad-mindedness and acceptance.

## VISIONS OF FONZIE

When we meet Lee, he is at the very apex of stage two militancy. The first half of *Yellow Fellas* involves Lee's effort to drag his fellow Asian brothers out of stage one ignorance and into stage two. In doing so, he inadvertently enters the third stage of tolerance.

### Lee

We Asians have no language to call our own. (southern accent) Yo for a Chinaman, ya speak English purdy good. (north eastern accent) Well Bubba, allow me to express my delight at having one so articulate as yourself, deem my command of English to be meritorious. (southern accent) Hell yeah! I reckon ya almost sound as good as I doody do. (revert) Either that or our grandparents covered their ears, howling in pain when we mangle their dialect. No wonder white people find us so inscrutable. Why open your mouth when you be damned no matter what comes out?

*"Language is the medium of culture and the people's sensibility, including the style of manhood. On the simplest level, a man in any culture speaks for himself. Without a language of his own, he no longer is a man. The tyranny of language has been used by white culture to suppress Asian-American culture and exclude it from operating in the mainstream of American consciousness."* Frank Chin

In his play, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Frank Chin created characters that are outspoken, funny and articulate. His use of dialogue is bold and inventive. As the writer of *Yellow Fellas*, I sought to emulate those qualities, for it was my intention to give Lee a distinctive voice, not only in *what* he says, but *how* he says it. Combining the GRE-busting vocabulary and rhetorical skills which was formerly the domain of a "good white education", with the verve and brio of a hip-hop street prophet, Lee's style of speaking reflects the cultural limbo of Asians. On one hand, they have successfully infiltrated institutions of higher education, on the other hand, they still function outside existing power structures, and their phraseology reflects this cultural distinction.

While Lee may not sound like most Asians, perhaps he is a harbinger of Asians to come. As minorities increasingly come forward to tell their stories, they will influence the course of history while illuminating the past.

### Lee

It's because the actors playing the roles can't do the accents. They can't do the accents because they were all born here! Second, third, fourth, fifth,

generation Canadians still expected to say me so solly, me like flied lice. Fifth generation? You guys been here that long? Who do you think built the railways mother f#\*^er?!

**A**lternatively didactic and profane, Lee's verbal eruptions are an embodiment of the "id" to the collective "ego" of the Asian Canadian community. He ferociously articulates the pain of racial historical injustice committed against a community long admired for its stoicism. All too often, the history of Asian Canadians is associated with Asia, and not with Canada. Canadian historians may be reluctant to include stories of Asian Canadian experience in history textbooks because it would require a recounting of Canada's racist past, and by extension a recognition of its racist present. Having been punished for being identified as the enemy, Asian Canadians have sought to assimilate at any cost, even at the expense of forgetting their own history. In doing so, they deprive their children of the collective memories of their community which can provide a source of sustenance in times of darkness. "A people without knowledge of their history is like a tree without roots," Marcus Garvey says.

After berating his Asian brothers for their ignorance of Asian North American history, Lee realizes that in order to subvert persistent myths, he must not only cite compelling historical facts, but he must also humanize history by introducing his young recruits to the actual people who lived it. Lee brings in a series of guests to accomplish his objective of subverting racist mythology with factual history.

**Mythology** Canada has always had a commitment to multiculturalism.

**History** The internment of Japanese Canadians during WW II.

**Lee**

Mosaic my ass! Bunrei here had his property confiscated, his family was separated, then they were incarcerated! In 1942, over 20,000 Japanese Canadians were evacuated from the west coast and into forced labour camps, creating the greatest mass movement in the history of Canada.

**Mythology** Asian men are passive, non-assertive and cowardly.

**History** The 442nd Regimental Combat Team/ The 100th Infantry Battalion.

**Lee**

You can keep your cartoon Kamikazes and don't give me no Hong Kong action figures. I got me here a real hero. Give it up for Eddy Kobayashi, real life veteran of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, The 100th Infantry Battalion.

## VISIONS OF FONZIE

Despite the forced internment of all Japanese on the West Coast of the United States, unjustly imprisoned Japanese American men still volunteered to risk their lives for a nation that treated them like enemies. The 442nd came to be known as the "Purple Heart Battalion" for their exceptional courage on the battlefields of Europe. This Japanese American battalion became the most decorated military unit in American history.

By offering tantalizing glimpses of veiled history, Lee aims to arouse the curiosity of his pupils so that they might be inspired to investigate their own history and genealogy, thereby gaining insight and pride in their heritage. If viewers themselves dig beneath the surface of official history, they will come to a better understanding of not only the dynamic that exists between nations, but between individuals.

### Lee

Show me an interracial couple, and I'll show you a white man with "Yellow Fever."

Most interracial households consist of an Asian and a Caucasian. Indeed, of all the ethnic groups in North America, Japanese have the highest rate of out-marriage. "Nationally between 60 and 70 per cent of Japanese Americans are marrying out white," says Frank Chin in *Yellow Seattle*. The news that Asians and whites are coming together in droves wouldn't be noteworthy, though it might even be worth celebrating, if it weren't for one disturbing fact: the vast majority of these couplings consist of an Asian woman and a white man. So when population specialists speak of the rise of interracial households, they are really referring to the spread of "Yellow fever," a theme explored in *Yellow Fellas*. Yellow fever – the white man's fetish for exotic oriental women – is eloquently deconstructed in the following excerpt from David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly*.

### SONG

"Consider it this way: what would you say if a blonde homecoming queen fell in love with a short Japanese businessman? He treats her cruelly, then goes home for three years during which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then, when she learns he has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot, correct? But because it's an oriental who kills herself for a Westerner – ah! – you find it beautiful."

### GIESHA SYNDROME

Yellow fever's ongoing virulent trend is fueled by two factors: western culture's continued fascination with the myth of the oriental woman as the feminine

ideal; submissive, exotic, sexually skilled, and long-suffering.

The second factor that contributes to the rampancy of Yellow Fever is the internalized racism of Asian women who have been conditioned by decades of anti-Asian male propaganda. The continuous invisibility of the Asian man in the western media is punctuated only by sporadic disparaging portrayals. Indeed, it is the very dearth of positive images of Asian men in the media that lead many Asian women to regard white men as superior, and consequently more desirable. Asian men find themselves rejected by their own.

The mandate of Yellow Fellas is to express and articulate the anger and frustration that many Asian men feel, and in doing so negate the stereotypes that bind them.

### Lee

How many Asians you know wanna be prime minister? How many Asians you know wanna be a rock star? a sport star? movie star? any star? Will somebody please tell me why the f#ck we Asians don't have any stars in our eyes? Why is it so few of us are gunnin' for the cosmos? But hell, in the class of immigrants, we have a lock on one award baby, Least-Likely-To-Be-Homeless! Ain't that a prize!

Asian men have been and continue to be depicted and perceived in the west as unmanly, shy, obsequious, uncreative, servile, emasculated, weak, effeminate, asexual, passive, quiet, obedient, poorly endowed sissies.

For all his posturing, Lee himself is not immune to the ubiquity of pernicious Asian male stereotypes. So sensitive is his self-esteem to these stereotypes, that he overcompensates in a reactive attempt to define himself in opposition to them.

Conversely, role models engender notions of proactive possibility in those who look to them, but in a perverse form of circular logic, the absence of Asian Canadian role models perpetuates the absence of Asian Canadian role models.

Through the portrayal of Asian Canadians on screen, whose actions range from speaking out to breaking the law, *Yellow Fellas* seeks to tap into the imaginative potential of Asians, and reflect back to an invisible culture image of possibility.

However, such possibilities are not limited to paths that lead to wealth or fame, but also to the deep personal satisfaction that can be found through following the path of an artist. In *Yellow Fellas* Lee's development as an artist takes an unexpected twist.

*"Be careful that in casting out your demons, you do not throw out the very best part of yourself."* Friedrich Nietzsche.

## VISIONS OF FONZIE

The call to be an artist does not preclude happiness. Indeed, many artists cite their work as the one thing that keeps them grounded. However, there is a breed of artist that is directly inspired through wrestling with their demons, and should they succeed in defeating those demons, they do so at their creative peril.

When Lee loses his anger, he also loses his ability and his desire to create, but in return he gains personal happiness. If one does not dispute that the pursuit of happiness should be the paramount aim in life, then Lee has chosen wisely. However, Lee is still left with a lingering doubt: Does abandoning the path of being a creator, or relinquishing the role of premium mobile constitute a breaking of faith? Or can it mean in a larger sense, that life itself (even middle-class life), is perhaps one more vehicle for inspiration and enlightenment in the artists' historical search for new mediums?

While *Yellow Fellas* will indeed be a penetrating look into the underlying racial tensions within Canadian society, the audience will not feel they are being harangued. For that would only serve to fulfill the most damning stereotype of all: Asians are humorless.

*Yellow Fellas* seeks to be nothing less than a declaration of cultural and intellectual independence, and an assertion of Asian Canadian manhood, disguised as an offbeat ethnic comedy.

As an emerging artist migrating from one medium to another, I do not feel my years in theatre have been wasted. For it is within the arena of theatre that I have been granted the opportunity to hone and develop my personal storytelling abilities, both as a writer and as a performer. It has allowed me to focus and develop my thematic concerns of being Asian Canadian. On an aesthetic level, working in theatre has also taught me to do more with less.

Through serious scholarship and imaginative cultural production we, as a collective, can deepen our understanding of the changes our communities are undergoing at this time in history. *Yellow Fellas* seeks to contribute to that understanding.

As an Asian Canadian artist I will be better able to achieve my long term goal; that is to create a body of work that makes a significant contribution to the understanding and development of Canadian culture.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

In the summer of 1997, a young woman by the name of Bahareh Hassan-Pourgol was busy using up a 10 show pass that she had won in a contest giveaway. It was for *Fantasia*, a Montreal film festival that showcases the very best of contemporary Hong Kong action cinema.

This was the situation in which I had first met her. She had never consid-

## VISIONS OF FONZIE

ered dating an Asian man before, but after coming off a steady week-long diet of Chow Yun Fat, (arguably the world's coolest actor) her mind was open.

We have been happily married for three years. So happily in fact, that other young women in her community now seek out Asian men.

And so it seems that within a tiny pocket of the Montreal Iranian community, Asian men have suddenly become cool, a notion to which I have only one response...with thumbs pointed skyward, we thrust our fists forward, while uttering that immortal syllable; "Aaaaaaaaaaay!" ®

BY ANNE YING DER

**A**t 56, Wayson Choy won the 1995 Trillium Award for *The Jade Peony*. His memoir *Paper Shadows, A Chinatown Childhood* was nominated for the 1999 Governor General's Non-Fiction Award. He reflected upon literary voice, oral history and Chinatown ghosts during the 1999 Vancouver Writers and Readers Festival.

**RP** You published your first book fairly late in life. Could you speak about the process...of finding your literary voice?

**WC** When I was starting out as a writer in my 20s I was assimilating and I didn't have the consciousness to understand that I would have a voice to talk about my own background and my past. Of course, in your 20s the past isn't as important.

And of course, it was a time when all of us—at least the people I knew in my generation—were assimilating and becoming bananas. We were told...you can't go back to China again...because the Communists were winning the war. I don't think that was ever in our minds. I knew so little Chinese and it was Toisanese! I knew.

So I didn't have a voice. That was the Chinatown voice, [the voice] I use to write my work now.

**RP** What was it like not to have your literary voice?

**WC** Well I didn't miss it because, remember, you have to have the consciousness to know something is missing. I think that is the amazing situation now with young people who are very aware of what their heritage is about and what they must focus on. In my generation, the literary canon was all European, British-centred, and so there were no examples other than...writing that suggested that the Chinese and other ethnic groups were exotic.

**RP** You've talked about internalizing oppression. You've said that by not giving voice to our stories we co-operate with oppression. Could you expand on what you mean by this?

# B E I N G W

**WC** When minorities are raised to believe that they are second class, and the world makes that assumption, you can grow up with those assumptions, so you internalize this sense, and you don't consciously understand that you're being treated as second class.

What [*Paper Shadows*] attempts to do is to explore the oppression and to

expose it, without really judging it. People lived those circumstances and didn't have the consciousness to judge it.

Some do emerge from those oppressions with more understanding, more compassion, and at some point if you live long enough, you realize how wrong it is. But that can only be possible if the culture and society itself is becoming aware of the injustices.

**RP** The stories of the pioneers in the old Toisan culture, the railroad workers, the people who worked in the restaurants, grocery stores, laundries...their stories remain for the most part untold. It's as if they're not valued.

**WC** ...the ferries, steam ships, canneries, shingle mills...Well, I don't know if it's because they're not valued. I think, increasingly, we understand [that] the basis [for] British Columbia's wealth is Third World labour and exploitation of all kinds. I think it's because those people came from a village culture and were not educated. You know, the poor rarely have their history recorded because they represent an oral culture, not a literary culture.

So it takes the first generation born here or the second...for the people who are the bridges between the two cultures, the past and the present, to emerge. It takes that time to absorb that history and to tell it.

Many of the [historical] documents are told by the oppressors or by those who have power. The people who had power in our own communities, the people who were literate, wanted to write a history that was not shameful, that was not revealing, of the poorer classes because people write out of pride. So I'm not surprised much of that history remains an oral history, and it's rapidly disappearing.

**RP** Can you speak a bit about the difference between commercial fiction and literature?

**WC** I think that commercial writing is definitely more plot-driven, and it falls into genres...The rules for the genres tend to be rigid so you can make a movie out

# A Y S O N C H O Y

of it with a beginning, middle and end.

But I think literature falls into places where the reader belongs, and it doesn't have a beginning or end. You simply fall into a world that becomes part of yours. Even though it begins foreign, it ends up being familiar. And I think that's the test of whether something has moved into the realm of literature.

## BEING WAYSON CHOY

**RP** New York, San Francisco and Vancouver contain the three great Chinatowns of North America. There is a Chinatown imagined by Hollywood which has entered popular culture. It's interesting to compare Hollywood's portrayal of Chinatown...to the Chinatown as it was lived and experienced by the people of your childhood memoir.

**WC** You see the images that have colonized Chinatown—the dark opium dens of the 1920s and 1930s—are the ones we really know through the movies. We simply have to create a literature in which those images are seen for what they are: stereotypes and dark imaginings projected by outsiders. And I hope books like mine will challenge and remove those images from the reality that was Chinatown.

**RP** How many authors have portrayed a Chinatown as having lived it as opposed to imagined it?

**WC** From my generation, very few, because many of my generation didn't go into literature. They went into things that made money. They became accountants, engineers and lawyers. They were urged to assimilate and to make money. That was the drive that sent people to Gold Mountain.

I was probably eccentric. I loved literature, and I made my decision. My parents were wonderfully supportive of the fact that education mattered and, as long as I was happy, they would go with it.

*Oedipal Rice* is one of the few pioneer fictions that [gave] an insight into what was the real Chinatown...[And] there is Maxine Hong Kingston, because she did a breakthrough work in creating a language that included mythologizing the Chinatown she grew up in.

**RP** I've heard you compare the oral tradition and oral history of these village people to Homer. What do you mean by this?

**WC** The oral traditions have to do with the idea of the ghosts that inhabit Chinatown, the history of the villagers, and the stories that were told to us as children to help us survive. For example, False Creek was very toxic, as you know, and the waters were very dangerous. So we were often told about water ghosts, Siew Kwei, which we were warned not to go near.

Homer was an oral tradition...spoken in vernacular language. It only became classical Greek after it was written down. I don't see the oral history of the Chinese villagers as any less valuable. (RP)

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1 Toisanese, or Toisan, was one of the defining dialects of Vancouver's Chinatown prior to the influx of migrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan after the 1960s.

BY JAE YU

**I**f you believe what you see on TV or in the movies, high schools are ruled by bullies, governed by jocks and run by the popular kids. They're inhabited by chess clubs, preppies, the audio/visual crowd. *Saved By The Bell*, *90210* and *Degrassi High*, this was my impression of high school as a child. But, I have yet to experience this since I've entered into high school.

My high school is a different kind of high school. It is a school where "who you are" is less emphasized than "what you are." It's a generation that seems to be more interested in ethnicity than in athletic ability, culture than intelligence, nationality than popularity.

Teenagers are hanging out in groups of similar ethnicity. Instead of a smorgasbord of mixed groups, there is a white group, a black group, a Chinese group, a Korean group, a Serbian group, a First Nations group, an East Indian group, even a banana (westernized Asian) group.

It's come to a point where it is almost socially awkward to be with people of a different racial origin than yours.

Danillo Tanic, a Serbian from Burnaby South high school, says, "If they are born here, they hang with a lot of different people, different cultures. But if you're born and raised somewhere else, you hang out with your own people because it's what you're used to, it's what you know."

Teenagers know it is generally easier to be accepted by people of your own culture. They speak a common language not only literally but also in experience and interests. They share cultural interests, like music, movies and sports that would normally be ridiculed by other people. They generally share the same experience, from place of birth to type of food to the way they were raised. These shared experiences bind these culture-based groups, often closer than any mixed group can.

"It's about who you relate to the most," says Burnaby South's Kenny Bahia, an East Indian. "Are you going to relate with someone of a different culture who's born here, or someone from where you're from and with the same culture as you do?"

Since the people that seem the most compatible are "your" people, schisms based on ethnicity continue to grow. By not allowing themselves to become more North American, immigrants are immediately attracted to "their own kind." The task of becoming North American by learning the language and the cultural nuances can seem like an all too daunting challenge. Without the cultural or linguistic skills to be accepted into a different group, they join groups of people similar to themselves.

"They segregate themselves because they don't speak the same language or have the same culture," says Angela Cho, a Korean from Burnaby North. "They don't try to hang out with others. I think it's because of the cultural barrier."

# CULTURE CLUB

## CULTURE CLUB

This cultural barrier not only consists of language and interests but also pride. At first, immigrants join groups who speak a similar language. Later, they develop a sense of pride in their culture. Even after adopting to the North American lifestyle, they hold onto this sense of pride. On one hand, it builds their self-esteem. Then afterwards, they just get used to it. But this pride is what continues to hold these ethnic groups together and what prevents a lot of mixed groups from forming.

It determines the way they dress, the things they do and even the way they speak. It determines whether they like all black clothes or sport clothes, rave or hip-hop, break-dancing or popping, bubble tea or slurpees. Pride in culture is a more powerful bond than the bonds that would unite people of different cultures.

Peter Andrinopoulos, a Greek Canadian, believes every culture has a sense of pride. "Being with your own people brings that out and reinforces that within you," he says. For many teenagers of almost any culture, elementary school was an experience of being a minority, where one's culture was not affirmed. Often teachers would prevent or forbid children from speaking their native tongue, and tried to North Americanize these kids through the ESL program.

To many teenagers, seeing others with the same ethnicity, speaking their language, knowing their culture, and expressing interests in similar activities feels almost like a triumph, considering their experience during their F.O.B ("fresh off the boat") days.

The social atmosphere of the school almost discourages mixed groups, since it seems to be the exception to the rule. To be with people other than your own seems awkward. These people are considered by some as "selling out" their culture.

But it's not only within North American cultures that this is happening. People of different cultures are associating themselves with groups of another culture, adopting the look and the interests of that group for themselves. Just look at the lone European in a group of Asians, the lone Asian in a group of East Indians. The fact that there are wannabes points to the popularity of these culture-based groups.

Walking through my school, the divisions are noticeable. The different groups of different cultures occupy separate areas during lunch. Clothing ranges from European sport to Asian formal. They are almost colour-coded. There are definite differences in hairstyles, vernacular, even lunch food. Although not the "American" assimilation, it is a different kind where people are assimilated into their own culture. It is multiculturalism in its segregate glory. (RP)