

# Heavy Hangs The Head of the Household: The Responsibility of Cultural Reproduction in the Chinese Diaspora

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**Abstract:** Wayson Choy's *All That Matters* depicts cultural reproduction within the Chinese diaspora as being the responsibility of the women of the family. The two main women of the novel, Stepmother and Poh-Poh, depict two very different methods of reproducing diasporic culture—Stepmother representing a newly-defined Chinese immigrant wife, and Poh-Poh being symbolic of Old China tradition that refuses to evolve in the diaspora—due to their different roles in society both in China and in Gold Mountain (BC).

One of the major themes of Wayson Choy's *All That Matters* (2004) is the reproduction of Chinese culture within the conditions of the diaspora. It is necessary to establish diaspora in this case as referring to the displacement of the Chen family due to war and famine in the Kwantung province (Choy 5), though diaspora itself speaks to the larger uprootedness from a homeland and a dispersion of a group of people across the globe. In the case of Chinese-Canadians, like the Chen family, diaspora led to discrimination both socially and politically, evidenced by policies such as the 1923 Exclusion Act in Canada and white supremacist manifestations such as the Vancouver Riots of 1907. Choy explores these conditions through many avenues, such as family structures, gender roles, identity, and ways of knowing. In the Chen family, the responsibility of reproducing and reconceptualizing Chinese cultural ideals falls to the women. The women are Poh-Poh and Stepmother, main character Kiam-Kim's grandmother and stepmother, respectively. Choy depicts Poh-Poh and Stepmother as the

agents of reconceptualizing Chinese culture in Gold Mountain (BC), though from two different perspectives: that of the traditional Chinese wife and the newly defined Chinese *immigrant* wife. Stepmother's role puts her directly at odds with Poh-Poh as she represents a new role that defies tradition as a necessity of survival, whereas Poh-Poh acts as a vessel of Old China, attempting to reproduce it within her grandkids. Comparatively, the men in the novel fall under the influence of Western ways, such as capitalism.

Through analyses of Poh-Poh and Stepmother's actions and influences on others, this essay will discuss the varying ways in which the novel's primary women engage with the reproduction and reconceptualization of Chinese cultural ideals such as mysticism, gender norms, and family structure. Although the two women both act in ways to preserve culture in Vancouver's Chinatown, they take on different methods based on their own connections to culture and the way it has evolved; Stepmother represents a marriage of Western and Chinese influences and Poh-Poh symbolically stands in for Old China. Choy's rendering of Old China constitutes the mysticism and rigid social structure present in the Chinese tradition. This is the tradition that Poh-Poh generally adheres to, leading to her all-or-nothing attitude regarding culture; *mo no* (no brain) (Choy 70) or *Tohng-Yahn no* (Chinese brain) (68). Further, this essay will examine how the division of the domestic and public spheres influences culturalization. The women, primarily relegated to the domestic sphere, are the agents of reconceptualizing culture within the family and Sekky—the sick kid also relegated to the home—is their success story. The men who exist both within and outside of the home sphere risk succumbing to Westernization and straying from cultural expectations, such as Kiam-Kim upholding the First Son title and values such as a belief in Hell.

*All That Matters* follows the story of the Chen family, particularly First Son, Kiam-Kim, as they navigate the Chinese diaspora in Vancouver's Chinatown. Emigrating initially with only his Father and Poh-Poh (grandmother), Kiam-Kim adjusts to new family dynamics with the arrival

of, firstly, the *gai-mou*—a "helpmate" (15)—who he knows as Stepmother, then his new siblings: brothers, Sekky and Jung-Sum and sister, Liang-Liang. The novel dives into familial relationships, particularly how they exist and evolve within the context of Chinese cultural expectation. As Kiam-Kim moves through childhood and adolescence within the diaspora, he grapples with the balance of Western and Chinese influences over all facets of his life, including language, identity, and friendship, all while maintaining the important role of First Son, who would "be responsible for the new offspring" (Choy 16), guiding them through life and acting as a role model.

Poh-Poh acts primarily in the novel as a domestic labourer. Not only does she perform the expected house-keeping and child-rearing tasks, but arguably her influential *talk stories* can be viewed as domestic labour. Yang Zhan defines the purpose of storytelling as "establishing a collective sense of social order, moral boundaries, and even group identities" (446). Poh-Poh's talk stories, while undoubtedly fantastical and embellished, serve as teaching tools to her grandchildren, as they generally have a moral associated with them. Most important is the Old China ways that she imbues into her narratives, primarily through superstitious traditions associated with her mysticism. In the tale of Mistress Mean Mouth, Poh-Poh describes appeasing her abusive mistress by using cooking oil to make her hair shine. The tale concludes with the mistress' death, which Poh-Poh alleges is her fault, as she had wished for it the night before (Choy 124–135). This tale primarily depicts the reality of servitude that Poh-Poh experienced in China and a moral to not wish harm on others but also amplifies the mystic elements that Poh-Poh associates with her culture. The mysticism in her stories further aligns her with Old China ideals. In this context, ideals can be considered interchangeable with tradition. The novel portrays Poh-Poh as highly superstitious, specifically relating to cultural practices. Her mysticism shows in her sheer conviction in the Kitchen God (75), Tsao Chung, whose photo hangs in the home's kitchen. As she tells Kiam-Kim, Tsao Chung makes reports back

to the Jade Emperor about their family (75). Men such as Third Uncle and Kiam-Kim's father undermine this mysticism. When Poh-Poh tries to reinforce mystic tradition by telling Kiam-Kim that smoke from a train is a dragon, they offer reason and suspicion instead: "Later that day, Father told me how—scientifically—it was only smoke [. . .] Third Uncle said [. . .] 'Sometime smoke, Kiam-Kim, and sometime not,'" (76).

Poh-Poh's immigration to Gold Mountain alongside her family stands out as unusual because it defies common immigration patterns while upholding traditional Chinese values. Due to strict immigration laws, many migrating labourers were unable to bring their entire families to North America with them, resulting in the evolution of the traditional Chinese family structure into nuclear families (47). However, Poh-Poh joins Kiam-Kim and his father in immigrating to Canada. While her migration defies this pattern, it upholds patterns of traditional Chinese family structure, wherein multiple generations live under one roof and the husband's parents act as the head (Ling 46). In reinforcing traditional family structure through her presence in the immediate household, Poh-Poh acts as a relic of Old China tradition. Her disruption of the particular immigration pattern that necessitates the role of the Chinese immigrant wife undermines Stepmother, as Old China structure dictates that wives are subject to the rule of their mothers-in-law (46).

However, Stepmother symbolizes the evolution of the Chinese wife, and as such, does not bend easily to Poh-Poh's will. In emigrating from China to Vancouver, the role of a Chinese wife adapted to the new, unwelcoming environment (Ling 50). In this environment, the role of Chinese wives is to be "Homemakers, wage earners, and culture bearers" (45). The roles of a traditional housewife—homemaking and culture bearing—were essential (47), but the need for survival thrust Chinese women into wage-earning roles (46). Further, wives were then considered to be "joint heads of the household" (46) alongside their husbands, as their financial contributions offered them more agency in family affairs (50). Stepmother embodies this new role first

and foremost through her employment at Keefer Wholesale Grocery (Choy 119). The act of a Chinese woman entering the workforce was, at the time, unexpected except within immigrant communities.

Upon her arrival, Stepmother still carries Old China with her. Her coming to Gold Mountain is even in accordance with Old China values—women lived under the authority of their clan (Ling, 43), their husband (43), and their in-laws (46), all of whom decided Stepmother would come to Canada. She later refutes the notion that she had a choice, and refers to herself as having been "bought" (Choy, 410). Stepmother acts as a "culture bearer" (Ling, 45) by reinforcing the social structure that led to her arrival in Canada, but also by bearing children. Choy defines a *gai-mou* as a "helpmate" (20) for Kiam-Kim's father, who "would have duties like a wife," but never claim the place of one; according to Poh-Poh, "This new companion not wife [. . .] She never-never to take First Wife's (Kiam-Kim's deceased mother) place" (Choy, 17). Part of a *gai-mou*'s responsibility is child bearing (Choy, 16–17). Stepmother's active role in the tradition reinforces the structure itself. By coming to Canada as a *gai-mou*, she is giving validity to the social structure that brought her there. Further, through child-bearing, she is creating a new generation of Chinese children on which the structures of Old China can be imposed. Stepmother is expected to produce sons (16–17), therefore enforcing the patriarchal attitudes and expectations of Old China.

One of the earliest instances of Stepmother's resistance to Old China ways takes place after she gives birth to Liang-Liang. Stepmother fears that her daughter will be taken away, as could be expected in China (Choy, 49), where daughters of poor families were often sold into servitude, like Poh-Poh (137). While Poh-Poh is not directly trying to take Liang-Liang—and in fact reassures Stepmother no such fate will befall Liang-Liang; "We lucky to be family here [. . .] No one starve here," (48)—the practice of selling daughters remains part of the Old China that Poh-Poh represents, especially given that she herself was "bought and sold three times" (137). The bed-making dispute, while only

referenced in a few lines, is one of the most revealing disagreements the two have. Shortly after Stepmother's arrival in Gold Mountain, she incites a silent standoff with Poh-Poh over the proper way to make the family's beds. The making of the bed can be considered a metaphor for the ways of life that Poh-Poh and Stepmother are respectively trying to perpetuate. Poh-Poh makes the bed with all the sheet corners tucked in (62), whereas Stepmother makes it "with three corners tightly tucked in but with one inviting corner flipped back" (62). Whereas Stepmother's way is "inviting" (62) due to the downturned corner, Poh-Poh's method is tight and rigid. While Poh-Poh eventually takes up Stepmother's bed-making ways (62), the dispute is deeply symbolic of the kind of culture and life they are trying to cultivate in the rest of the family; one way that conforms entirely to rigid expectation and the other that marries traditional practices with new ways of life.

Stepmother's being a cultural bearer places her in a position somewhere between Old China and Gold Mountain. An instance that exemplifies Stepmother's position is her discipline of Kiam-Kim when he returns home drunk after school. While Poh-Poh and Father are both furious, Stepmother sympathetically speaks to him and tells him "...Call back to your mother, Kiam-Kim. Tonight, before you sleep, think what she would say to you about your behaviour," (Choy, 242–243). While she does not condone his behaviour, she does not discipline him based on the family structure that Poh-Poh and Father employ. Moreover, when Kiam-Kim doesn't want to do his Chinese school work, Stepmother offers Chinese comic books as a reprieve (79). Once again, her actions teeter between Gold Mountain and Old China. She does not allow him to read English, similarly to Poh-Poh not wanting him to read the English words on fruit boxes (69–71), but offers a culturally acceptable alternative to schoolwork. In this way, Stepmother does not enforce the same traditional ideals as Poh-Poh, but also defies the influence of Canada.

Outside the domestic sphere, the men in the novel risk succumbing to Western influences and cultural frame-

works. Choy depicts Chinatown as a predominantly male space from the time Stepmother arrives in Gold Mountain, when "the mahjong ladies gradually introduced stepmother to everything knowable in *Tohng-Yahn Gaai*, China-People Street – or at least as much as the women were permitted to know," (44). This line reflects how Chinatown restricts women's movement in the public sphere. Women in the novel are unwelcome at merchant luncheons (73) but grocery markets are highlighted as a space held by women (45), emphasizing the line women must walk in Choy's Chinatown; they are able to move about certain spaces freely but are barred from those of importance. The domestic sphere is, comparatively, feminine, not only historically, but the novel portrays it as such through the events and scenes that take place there; the cooking scene where Poh-Poh puts Kiam-Kim in a frilly apron (91), a birth that Kiam-Kim is banned from seeing and told the night is for "women only" (192), Poh-Poh and her friends' mahjong sessions (88).

Outside the domestic sphere lies the danger of Westernization, and where the men who move throughout the public sphere freely may fall victim to it. Kiam-Kim learns of the Catholic Hell from his Catholic best friend, Jack, (Choy, 213) and begins to obsess over it (220). Jack, although his Irish heritage leaves him an outlier in the larger Gold Mountain community, still represents something *other* than the culture Kiam-Kim is accustomed to. In this case, Jack introduces Kiam-Kim to the concept of Hell, which directly opposes the belief that Poh-Poh tries to project onto her family of Buddhist levels of Hell, where "There [are] different Hells for different kinds of sins. And the more you sinned, the more levels you were thrown into" (214). The delinquency Kiam-Kim participates in briefly also defies Poh-Poh's rigid expectations of a good First Son. When he comes home drunk and smelling of liquor, Kiam-Kim is called a "Useless boy!... Drunken dead boy!" (240), therefore failing to uphold the traditional family values of Old China as he has failed as a role model to his siblings. This line is both a stark contrast to Stepmother's discipline, as mentioned above, and a call back to Poh-Poh's friends, Mrs. Chong, describing her

daughter, Jenny, in the same way when she defies her father earlier in the novel (90).

There are several figures in Chinatown who influence young Kiam-Kim but the three most noteworthy of them would be Kiam-Kim's father, Third Uncle, and the neighbourhood black sheep Frank Yeun. Kiam Kim's father is seen to prioritize work over cultural activities: "Father could have engaged us with many of his stories of Old China, but he was always busy in pursuit of one part time job after another" (Choy, 120). While he could exert this influence to order to assert Old China ideals, his efforts display instead to Kiam-Kim that the systems of Gold Mountain, particularly economic systems, are more important, as the text portrays him as consistently overworked by his boss and paper family sponsor, Third Uncle, as well as pursuing other revenues (120–121). Kiam-Kim looks to his father for guidance, as he explicitly states later on, "I wanted to be more like Father, who seemed to understand how, in Canada, everything was scientific and modern," (203). As a child who looks up to his father, the prioritization of Western capitalism from his father influences Kiam-Kim as well. Another of Kiam-Kim's influences away from the home include Frank Yeun. Frank teaches the neighbourhood kids about sex (Choy, 275), which is yet another departure from cultural ideals. Earlier in the novel, Mrs. Chong and Poh-Poh begin their attempts at matchmaking between Kiam-Kim and Jenny, displaying standards of traditional matchmaking. Poh-Poh claims that it is "not Old China way," (179) referring to how Jenny and Kiam-Kim meet through Poh-Poh's friendship with Jenny's mother, to which Mrs. Chong clarifies "Old way better" (179). Thus inter-family matchmaking contradicts Old China tradition. Frank Yeun's teachings, by this logic, are far from condoned by traditional Chinese values.

Sekky, conversely, can be seen as Poh-Poh's legacy and success story. Sekky is the only child to carry on his grandmother's superstitious ways. After her death, not only does he claim to see Poh-Poh's ghost (Choy, 372), but also attempts to carry on their New Year's tradition of burning the photo of the Kitchen God (379). Sekky's continuation of



Old China ways is largely due to his relegation to the domestic sphere. As a sick child, he does not attend school for most of the novel and thus spends the majority of his time in the home under the influence of Stepmother and Poh-Poh. However, during Sekky's first months, Stepmother maintains part-time work (167), therefore leaving him primarily under the care and influence of his mystic grandmother. As a result, he is the only one of the children shown to carry on Old China ways.

Stepmother also exists within and outside of the home sphere. The Western influences that he undergoes help her to stand up for herself in a way that would be unacceptable in Chinese tradition. Stepmother's resilience shows when she discusses the internment of Japanese Canadians and the dispossession of their goods. Despite the overwhelming anti-Japanese rhetoric in Chinatown, Stepmother advocates that it is morally wrong to buy up their belongings, "We don't want any of it" (409). The reactions to her outburst further exemplify how unexpected it is that she speaks out for herself: "Father glared at her. The atmosphere between them was explosive" (409). This interaction contrasts her earlier behaviour that aligned with the subservient expectation of women; "Father seemed proud of Stepmother's silences, the way she sat and knitted, hummed tunes and complained little, except about a backache or two" (152). Weighing Stepmother's actions from the beginning to the end of the novel reveals a sharp contrast, proving that Western influence has empowered her to stand her ground against the men in the novel.

In his novel, Choy opens a discussion on the reproduction of culture within diasporic environments and communities such as Gold Mountain, ultimately placing the weight of the responsibility on women and the domestic sphere, exemplified through Poh-Poh and Stepmother. The gendered biases of the responsibility of cultural reproduction and reconceptualization is evident in the comparison of men and women of Chinatown: the women, who have limited access to the male-dominated spaces that lie outside the female-designated sphere of the home, end up being

those to encourage cultural connections in their families. However, the men are at risk of succumbing to the Western attitudes that permeate the environment outside of the home. Choy uses the two women as symbols of opposing, but co-existing ideals of Chineseness, representing how they conflict and overlap within the Chinese diaspora.

### Works Cited

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