

# Wayson Choy

A NOVEL

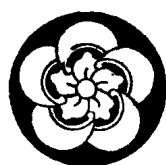
## The Jade Peony

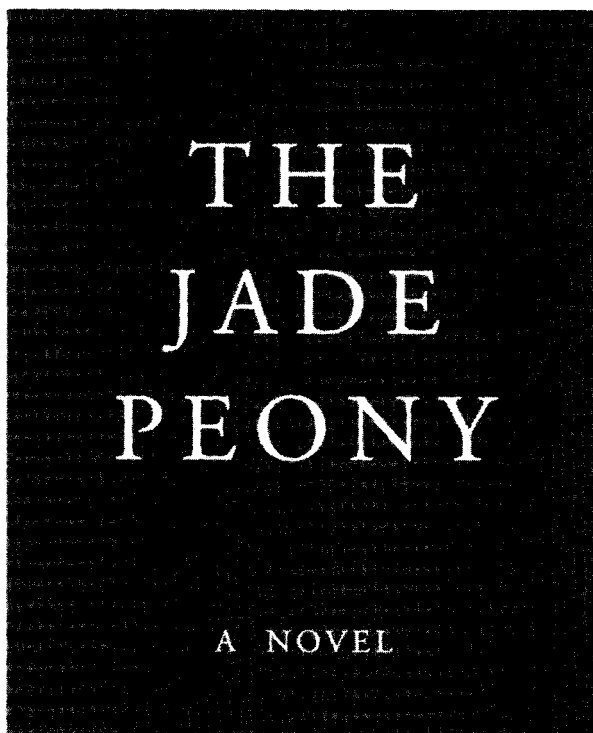


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CHOY

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DOUGLAS & McINTYRE





VANCOUVER / TORONTO

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Douglas & McIntyre Ltd.  
1615 Venables Street  
Vancouver, British Columbia V5L 2H1

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Choy, Wayson, 1939-  
The jade peony

ISBN 1-55054-468-3

I. Title.

PS8555.H69J3 1995 C813'.54 C95-910538-7  
PR9199.3.C56J3 1995

Editing by Saeko Usukawa

Design by Michael Solomon

Cover photograph by Tony Makepeace/Studio Northwest (properties  
courtesy of Richard Seto, The Kensington Kitchen and the author)

Printed and bound in Canada by Transcontinental Printing Inc., Métrolitho division

Printed on acid-free paper

Lines from the poem "Translations" from *Expounding the Doubtful Points*  
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The publisher gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Canada Council  
and of the British Columbia Ministry of Tourism, Small Business,  
and Culture.

To my aunts,  
Freda and Mary,  
and in memory of  
Toy and Lilly Choy.



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## *Author's Note*

Four volumes contained the key information that helped to ground my early memories of Vancouver's Chinatown, for which I extend grateful acknowledgement: Paul Yee's *Saltwater City*; Ken Adachi's *The Enemy That Never Was*; the collected oral histories found in *Opening Doors, Vancouver's East End* by Daphne Marlatt and Carole Itter; and Kay J. Anderson's *Vancouver's Chinatown*.

This book is a work of fiction. Therefore, any references to actual historical events and locales, and any references or resemblances to persons, mythic, living or dead, are used for the purposes of fiction and are entirely coincidental. I am also responsible for any rendering of Chinese phrases and complex kinship terms into English equivalents, and for the adoption of the different sets of rules for the spelling of Chinese words.

I thank the *UBC Chronicle*, the *Toronto Star*, and the *Malahat Review*, in which portions of this book, in slightly different versions, first appeared.

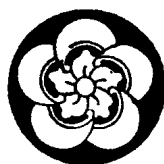
*Tòhng Yàhn Gāai* was what  
we once called  
where we lived: “China-People-  
Street.” Later, we mimicked  
Demon talk  
and wrote down only  
*Wàh Fauh*—“China-Town.”  
The difference  
is obvious: the people  
disappeared.

—Wing Tek Lum, “Translations”



PART ONE

JOOK-LIANG, ONLY SISTER







## ONE

THE old man first visited our house when I was five, in 1933. At that time, I had only two brothers to worry about. Kiam and Jung were then ten and seven years old. Sekky was not yet born, though he was on his way. Grandmother, or Poh-Poh, was going regularly to our family Tong Association Temple on Pender Street to pray for a boy.

Decades later, our neighbour Mrs. Lim said that I kept insisting on another girl to balance things, but Stepmother told me that these things were in the hands of the gods.

Stepmother was a young woman when she came to Canada, barely twenty and a dozen years younger than Father. She came with no education, with a village dialect as poor as she was. Girls were often left to fend for themselves in the streets, so she was lucky to have any family interested in her fate. Though my face was round like Father's, I had her eyes and delicate mouth, her high forehead but not her high cheekbones.

This slim woman, with her fine features and genteel posture, was a seven-year-old girl in war-torn China when bandits killed most of her family. Found hiding between two trunks of clothes, she was taken to a Mission House, then taken away again, reclaimed by the village clan, and eventually sold into Father's

Canton merchant family. For years they fed her, taught her house duties, and finally put her on a steamship to Canada. She was brought over to help take care of Poh-Poh and to keep Father appropriate wifely company; but soon the young woman became more a wife than a concubine to Father, more a stepdaughter than a house servant to Grandmother. And a few years later, I, Jook-Liang, was born to them. Now, in our rented house, she was big with another child.

Poh-Poh, being one of the few elder women left in Vancouver, took pleasure in her status and became the arbitrator of the old ways. Poh-Poh insisted we simplify our kinship terms in Canada, so my mother became "Stepmother." That is what the two boys always called her, for Kiam was the First Son of Father's First Wife who had died mysteriously in China; and Jung, the Second Son, had been adopted into our family. What the sons called my mother, my mother became. The name "Stepmother" kept things simple, orderly, as Poh-Poh had determined. Father did not protest. Nor did the slim, pretty woman that was my mother seem to protest, though she must have cast a glance at the Old One and decided to bide her time. That was the order of things in China.

"What will be, will be," all the *lao wah-kiu*, the Chinatown old-timers, used to say to each other. "In Gold Mountain, simple is best."

There were, besides, false immigration stories to hide, secrets to be kept.

Stepmother was sitting on a kitchen chair and helping me to dress my Raggedy Ann; I touched her protruding tummy, I wanted the new baby all to myself. The two boys were waving toy swords around, swinging them in turn at three cutout hardboard nodding heads set up on the kitchen table. *Whack!* The game was to send the flat heads flying into the air to fall on a roll-out floor map of China. *Whack!* The game was Hong-Kong made and called ENEMIES OF FREE CHINA.

One enemy head swooped up and clacked onto the linoleum floor, missing its target by three feet. Jung started to swear when

Father looked up from his brush-writing in the other room. He could see everything we were doing in the kitchen. Poh-Poh sat on the other side of the table, enjoying Kiam and Jung's new game. Bags of groceries sat on the kitchen counter ready for supper preparations.

"I need a girl-baby to be my slave," I insisted, remembering Poh-Poh's stories of the time she herself once had a girl-helper in the dank, steamy kitchen of the cruel, rich Chin family in Old China. The Chins were refugees from Manchuria after the Japanese seized the territory. Not knowing any better, Poh-Poh treated the younger girl, her kitchen assistant, as unkindly as she herself had been treated; the women of the rich Chin family who "owned" Poh-Poh were used to wielding the whip and bamboo rods as freely on their fourteen servants as on the oxen and pigs.

"Too much bad memory," Poh-Poh said, and then, midway in its telling, would suddenly end a story of those old days. She would make a self-pitying face and complain how her arteries felt cramped with pain, how everything frustrated her, "*Ahyaii, ho git-sum!* How heart-cramp!" Though she was years younger than Poh-Poh, Mrs. Lim would shake her head in agreement, both of them clutching their left sides in common sympathy. It was a gesture I'd noticed in the Chinese Operas that Poh-Poh took me and my brothers to see in Canton Alley.

*Whack!* Another head rolled onto the floor. Kiam swung his toy sword like an ancient warrior-king from the Chinese Opera. Jung preferred to use his sword like a bayonet first, and then, *Whack!*

"Maybe Wong Bak—Old Wong—keep you company later, Liang-Liang," Poh-Poh said, happily stepping over one of the enemies of Free China to get some chopsticks from the table drawer. She was proud of her warrior grandsons. "Kill more," she commanded.

Poh-Poh spoke her *Sze-yup*, Four County village dialect, to me and Jung, but not always to Kiam, the First Son. With him, she spoke Cantonese and a little Mandarin, which he was studying in

the Mission Church basement. Whenever Stepmother was around, Poh-Poh used another but similar village dialect, in a more clipped fashion, as many adults do when they think you might be the village fool, too worthless or too young, or not from their district. The Old One had a wealth of dialects which thirty-five years of survival in China had taught her, and each dialect hinted at mixed shades of status and power, or the lack of both. Like many Chinatown old-timers, the *lao wah-kiu*, Poh-Poh could eloquently praise someone in one dialect and ruthlessly insult them in another.

"An old mouth can drop honey or drop shit," Mrs. Lim once commented, defeated by the acrobatics of Grandmother's twist-punning tongue. The Old One roared with laughter and spat into the kitchen sink.

*Whack!*

Another head fell.

Stepmother rubbed her forehead, as if it were driving her mad.

"Wong Bak come for supper tonight," Poh-Poh said, signalling Stepmother to start preparing the supper. The kitchen light caught something gleaming on the back of her old head; Poh-Poh had put on her jade hair ornament for Wong Bak's visit tonight. He was an Old China friend of Grandmother's; they were both now in their seventies.

Wong Bak had been sent from the British Columbia Interior by a group of small-town Chinese in a place called Yale. He was too old to live a solitary existence any longer. Someone in our Tong Association gave Father's name as a possible Vancouver contact, because Old Wong might know Poh-Poh, who had once lived in the same ancestral district village.

Most Chinatown people were from the dense villages of southern Kwangtung province, a territory racked by cycles of famine and drought. When the call for railroad workers came from labour contract brokers in Canada in the 1880s, every man who was able and capable left his farm and village to be indentured for dangerous work in the mountain ranges of the Rockies. There had also