THE POETRY & PHILOSOPHY ISSUE

ALMIGHTY ASIAN CANADIAN PHILOSOPHER-POETS

CAO YU: PIONEER OF MODERN CHINESE DRAMA

NEW FICTION BY TERRY WATADA AND YASUKO THANH
Ricepaper 16.4

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PHILOSOPHER-POETS

BY EURY CHANG

AT THIS TIME, IT'S PROBABLY APPROPRIATE TO MENTION the passing to two prominent members of the Asian Canadian community: David Y.H. Lui and Milton Wong. Lui, a former board member of The Canada Council for the Arts, founder of Ballet BC, and one of the most dedicated impresarios this country has ever produced, passed away last September 2011. Wong, noted arts philanthropist and businessman (who was profiled in Issue 15.1 of Ricepaper), passed away early this year. In addition to their many accomplishments in their respective fields of endeavor, both of these leaders worked together to bring The Vancouver International Dragon Boat Festival to fruition, giving us a signature event that combine a healthy competitive spirit with multicultural values and world-class performances. If there is any small consolation to this great double loss, it would be that both men left such a lasting legacy. Perhaps we can usher in 2012, the official Year of the Dragon, knowing that we can learn from people with such integrity and pride in Asian Canadian Art and Culture.

The twin themes of "Philosophy & Poetry" in Issue 16.4 offer us an opportunity to showcase some of the most active contemporary poets living in Canada today. Perhaps poets are the deepest of all thinkers, not least because they bring life to a certain stillness or abstraction. By provoking our senses and imagination through carefully chosen language, poetry can challenge our personal philosophies and encourage us to think and see in new ways. In this issue, we will also find our usual mixture of engaging profiles, fiction, and articles covering a variety of literary topics and genres.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the work of outgoing team members Patricia Lin and Melissa Guzman, both of whom have dedicated many years to Ricepaper magazine. We are definitely better as a result of their efforts and energy. Also, please welcome Kristin Cheung aboard as new Managing Editor.

Most of all, we would like to thank you for your continued readership. Your interest, curiosity and support of this magazine is greatly appreciated.

Kung Hei Fat Choy!

Best regards,

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TORONTO FILMMAKER QUENTIN LEE'S
The People I've Slept With (2009) may seem
like a sex-comedy at odds with Asian Cana-
dian religious values. The story is set in Cali-
foria - but the movie is classified as Canadian
because of Lee's Torontonian roots - and re-
volves around the love lives of Angela Yang
(Karin Anna Cheung, Better Luck Tomorrow), a
woman who accidentally gets pregnant amidst
her countless sexual escapades, and her gay
best friend Gabriel (Wilson Cruz, My So-Guiled
Life), whose quest for marriage to the same-sex
love of his life leads him to a fundamentalist
church where he is "re-virgined" by sprinkling
baptism until marriage.

As fascinating as they may be, I am less in-
terested in Angela and Gabriel than I am in
Angela's socially conservative and presumably
evangelical Christian sister, Juliet (Lynn Chen,
Saving Face, Surrogate Valentine). Juliet advises
Angela in light of her pregnancy to get married
instead of getting an abortion (an Asian Cana-
dian Christian no-no): "Maybe this is God's
way of saying settle down, grow up, and be
truly happy for once in your life." According
to Angela, Juliet has "a perfect husband and
kids out of the Gap catalogue," and Angela
wants that too, igniting her quest to find the
baby's father. But Angela's dad (James Shiogta,
Flower Drum Song) tells her not to rush into
marriage because no family is perfect, as Juliet
"is about ten years from realizing." I found
myself wondering if Juliet's evangelical fam-
ily, like many such families among both Asian
Americans and Asian Canadians, might con-
tain sexual skeletons and gender insecurities,
unexplored in the film, that could be fair game
for an Asian Canadian popular culture probe.

The People I've Slept With doesn't leave the re-
ligious tantalizations there. Angela's top suitor
and most probable impregnator is aspiring pro-
business, family-values politician Jefferson Lee
(Archie Kao, CSI, Power Rangers Lost Galaxy).
Angela tells him to his face that she is sure that
her evangelical sister would vote for him. In
fact, I'm sure that the Canadian media would
expect Juliet to vote for him too, given its as-

sions of a conservative turn in the religious immigrant vote over the last ten years due to the advent of politics that focus on family values. As a conservative politician professing to represent the religious interests of Asians in North America, Jefferson's affair with Angela doesn't exactly square with Juliet's evangelical "Gap catalogue" family values. It's also ironic that Jefferson, a politician who advocates for traditional family systems, almost marries Angela at the same time as Gabriel wed his partner in a same-sex ceremony, another seeming religious faux-pas. But instead of calling for personal moral accountability and public-private consistency for Jefferson Lee, I suggest that Asian Canadian writers, artists, and filmmakers could seize on these inconsistencies for their own creative output. Indeed, in the same spirit as American political biopics like Clint Eastwood's *J. Edgar* (2011) or Oliver Stone's *W.* (2008), I wonder if public figures supported by Asian Canadian religious communities, whether their politics sway left or right, might be worth treatments in semi-fiction.

But on second thoughts, I wonder if anyone would care much about Juliet Yang and Jefferson Lee. The problem, of course, is that they're supposed to be Christians (or at least get the Christian vote), and that's not very erotic for an Asian Canadian religion. I suspect this partly contributed to why the film was largely panned. While many of the negative reviews shy away from mentioning the Asians, *Box Office Magazine* tackled the elephant in the room. Aghast to find "Asian filmmakers both fitting in and caving into western social norms for the sake of cinematic parody." Granted, the criticism is a reference to the *American Pie* connections, but by way of corollary, it suggests that Juliet and her character Angela's promiscuity are also borrowed from "western" evangelical tropes. Don't Asians have their own non-western religions with conservative sexual norms? Wouldn't a reference to Confucius help Jefferson's family values political campaign? Wouldn't the film be less western if Juliet were Buddhist?

In short, Juliet and Jefferson aren't from real Asian Canadian religions. *Box Office Magazine*'s tactfully religious critique is in good company. In 2005, Citizenship and Immigration Canada published a report on the state of migration and multiculturalism in Vancouver based on the 2001 census. Immigrants have brought to Vancouver several religions that are virtually absent among the Canadian-born, the report read. "One-quarter of immigrants as a whole and an even greater share of recent immigrants are Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus or Sikhs. Among the Canadian-born, none of these four religions claims the affiliation of more than 3% of the population." Sure, the report acknowledges that 15% of recent immigrants are Catholic, that the proportion of Protestant immigrants has decreased by half compared to those prior to 1986, and that the percentage of secular immigrants roughly mirrors the Canadian-born at over one-third. But the excitement over the new Asian (Muslim/Buddhist/Hindu/Sikh) religious plurality seems to designate the new religions (20% total immigrants: 16% before 1986; 29% 1986-1995; 25% 1995-2001) as immigrant (Asian) religions. By contrast, the clearly larger proportion of Christians among the immigrant populations (43% total immigrants: 75% before 1986, 52% 1986-1995; 34% 1995-2001) simply reinforces the Canadian religious status quo. As the mock cultural studies blog *Stuff White People Like* puts it, "religions that their parents don't belong to" are the fascinating ones when people think of Asian Canadian religion. Juliet Yang and Jefferson Lee aren't as Asian-cool because they're just the old time religion in a different skin color.

No. 5 Road in Richmond, BC, a three-kilometre stretch of road that lines up over 20 different religious institutions in one row, is a site prone to just this sort of erotic oversight. I'm involved with a collaborative project to explore the road with Claire Dwyer (University College London, Geography) and David Ley (UBC, Geography) funded by Metropolis Canada, a consortium of policy-makers and academics on issues of immigration in Vancouver. The project involved meeting with the community on the street where we started the project revolved around how much of the religious activity that [Asian studies scholars] have studied overseas has become increasingly visible right here in the province."
be evangelical, but she has to walk a fine line between intervening in and tolerating the sex lives of her non-evangelical extended family. Jefferson may represent the moral minority as well as his powerful ethno-religious Taiwanese family, but he has to tolerate between his public family-values high ground celebrated by religious communities and his private affair with Angela that smacks of a secular sexual ethic. Negotiating hybrid religious backgrounds seems to be a common Asian Canadian trope here. And of course, this isn’t particular to these films. Think about Wayson Choy, like many others, who attended Christian church kindergarten in Vancouver’s Chinatown and went home to popular Asian religious views.

I also think about my students who tell me that they are Vietnamese, they can be simultaneously Pure Land Buddhist and Roman Catholic. And if I reflect carefully, some of the uncles and aunts at the Chinese churches of which I’ve been a part, emphasize the exclusivity of Christianity as the way to God because they don’t want to betray their connection to Chinese popular religions, which suggests in a twisted way that they can’t stop thinking about their former religious experiences.

It’s not exotic for Asian Canadians to have hybrid religious backgrounds. It’s normal to the point where it’s offensive to some Asian Canadian religious communities when they get boxed into a narrow either-or of Asian or Western religious practice. Li Yu, a history instructor at Langara College, has pointed out, as have I, that the number of Christians (35%) within the Chinese population in Vancouver exceed that of the Buddhists (15%). What was controversial was that Li argued in turn that Chinese Christianity in Vancouver should be considered a “Chinese religion.” Religion journalist Douglas Todd used this assertion for his Chinese New Year article in 2011, arguing that Chinese communities in Vancouver are spaces where Chinese cultural traditions, like Chinese New Year, insulated the Chinese community from the Canadian mainstream with a veneer of Christian practice. Todd’s article was subsequently blasted by the Vancouver Chinese Evangelical Ministerial Fellowship, Chinese Christians were Canadian, said the response, because they rooted for Canadian hockey teams, spoke English with their Canadian friends, and joined Canadian Christian denominations. The Chinese Christian pastors read themselves as being re-exoticized, and exoticism, they imply, produces false religious binaries. If, at a religious level, Eve can be both Buddhist and Catholic (as my Vietnamese students are), then why can’t Chinese Christians at a merely cultural level be both Chinese and Canadian? Why can’t the “Juliet Yang” and “Jefferson Lees” of the world be more personally complicated than their publicly Asian Canadian, religious, and socially conservative faces?

Despite their Chinese essentialism, I think the pastors have something to say. Maybe Quentin Lee and Julia Kwan have taken the first step in de-exoticized films concerning Asian Canadian religions. But let me take this further. What are the skeletons in Juliet’s evangelical family closet? How do we portray Jefferson Lee in a way that blurs the lines between his public support of religious values espoused by many Asians in North America and his private sexual life? What kinds of stories are Asian Canadian kids like Eve and my Vietnamese students telling about their mixed religious upbringings? Maybe, in religious scholar Rudy Busto’s words, it’s time that we “disOriented” the exoticism of Asian Canadian religions. Maybe then, Asian Canadian popular culture can finally probe the contradictions of everyday religious negotiations as an integral part of Asian Canadian identities.

That said, my everyday life is filled with encounters with people who think what I study is exotic. I’ve learned recently that when I sit in a coffee shop with books entitled Asian American Religions or Faithful Generations or Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America, random people will ask a lot of questions. “Are you Buddhist?” one Caucasian woman asked me hopefully. Unfortunately, no. She ploughed forward in a nostalgic voice: “I find the history of religions fascinating, especially how all of it grew out of agricultural patterns and the seasons.” I wonder what Juliet Yang would say to that.


Douglas Todd, "Chinese celebrate festival despite shift in religious beliefs: Metro Vancouver's 34,000-strong Chinese Christian population continues to observe Lunar New Year despite its roots in Buddhism," The Vancouver Sun, 4 February 2011, A9.