

DENISE CHONG

"BEING CANADIAN"

*Denise Chong is a Canadian-born economist who worked for Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau in the 1970s. In her book *The Concubine's Children* (1994), she told how she rediscovered the courageous and tragic story of what her Chinese forebears had done so that she would be born and grow up Canadian.*

*It was the kind of story others - perhaps even she - would be told to suppress or to glorify, but, as Denise Chong argues here, only truth can add real nobility to our roots. Her speech, delivered during Citizenship Week, 1995, is a stirring appeal to honesty and courage - and to pride in the country all our varied ancestors helped to create.*

I ask myself what it means to be a Canadian. I was lucky enough to be born in Canada. So I look back at the price paid by those who made the choice that brought me such luck.

South China at the turn of the century became the spout of the tea pot that was China. It poured out middle class peasants like my grandfather, who couldn't earn a living at home. He left behind a wife and child. My grandfather was 36 when exclusion came. Lonely and living a penurious existence, he worked at a saw mill on the mud flats of the Fraser River, where the Chinese were third on the pay scale behind Whites and Hindus. With the door to Chinese immigration slammed shut, men like him didn't dare even go home for a visit, for fear Canada might bar their re-entry. With neither savings enough to go home for good, nor the means once in China to put rice in the mouths of his wife and child there, my grandfather wondered when, if ever, he could return to the bosom of a family. He decided to purchase a concubine, a second wife, to join him in Canada.

The concubine, at age 17, got into Canada on a lie. She got around the exclusion law in the only way possible: she presented the authorities with a Canadian birth certificate. It had belonged to a woman born in Ladner, British Columbia, and a middleman sold it to my grandfather at many times the price of the old head tax. Some years later, the concubine and my grandfather went back to China with their two Vancouver-born daughters. They lived for a time under the same roof as my grandfather's first wife. The concubine became pregnant. Eight months into her pregnancy, she decided to brave the long sea voyage back so that her third child could be born in Canada. His false Canadian birth certificate would get her in. Accompanied by only my grandfather, she left China. Three days after the boat docked, on the second-floor of a tenement on a back alley in Vancouver's Chinatown, she gave birth to my mother.

Canada remained inhospitable. Yet my grandparents chose to keep Canada in their future. Both gambled a heritage and family ties to take what they thought were better odds in the lottery of life. The gratitude owed them can perhaps best be expressed by my mother's brother in China - the son of my grandfather and his first wife. In the late 1980s, my mother and I found the family left behind. My uncle pressed a letter into my mother's hand on the last night of our visit. It read, in part, AAs parents, who would not be concerned about the future of his or her children? I hope to get my children out of China to take root in Canada. Then, the roots of the tree will grow

downwards and the leaves will be luxuriant. We will be fortunate, the children will be fortunate and our children's children will be fortunate. The family will be glorious and future generations will have a good foundation.

My own sense, four generations on, of being Canadian is one of belonging. I belong to a family. I belong to a community of values. I didn't get to choose my ancestors, but I can try to leave the world a better place for the generations that follow. The life I lead begins before and lingers after my time.

The past holds some moral authority over us. Rather than forget it, we must acknowledge that we have one, and learn the lessons of it. We have to be vigilant about looking past the stereotypes and seeing the contrasting truths. It means understanding that someone's grandfather didn't change the family name from French to English to forsake his heritage, but to make it easier to find a job. It means lifting the charge against the early Chinese of having no family values by seeing how the laws and history cleaved their families in two. It means going to the Legion and looking at a Sikh and seeing the veteran as well as the turban.

If we don't, we won't see that the layers of injustice cut deep. It happened in my own family. My grandfather couldn't afford a concubine. To repay the cost of my grandmother's false papers and passage to Canada, he indentured her as a tea house waitress. In the bachelor societies of the Chinatowns of their day, a kay toi nen was seen as one and the same as a prostitute - both were there to woo men to spend money. My grandmother would spend the rest of her lifetime trying to climb up from that bottom rung of society. I, too, condemned my Popo, until I learned what she had been fighting against all her life.

Despite the luck of my mother's birth, discrimination continued to cast a long shadow over her growing-up years. Her parents separated. In neither of their lifetimes would either find work outside Chinatown. My mother knew too well the path to the pawn shop where she accompanied her mother to translate as she bargained her jewelry to pay her gambling debts. The wall on my mother's side of the bed at the rooming house was wallpapered with academic certificates. My mother wanted to become a doctor. She didn't know that it would be years after her time before the faculty of medicine at the University of British Columbia would admit its first Chinese student. Despite the narrow confines of her life, the opportunity of education gave my mother a chance to dream.

Eventually exclusion against Chinese immigration was lifted and other barriers of discrimination began to fall. My mother's generation was the last to grow up in Chinatown. Gradually, the Chinese became part of the larger society. In 1947, my mother no longer had to call herself Chinese. With exclusion lifted, and the new citizenship act that Canada brought in that same year, for the first time in her life my mother could call herself Canadian.

My parents walked out from the shadow of the past. They were determined to raise their five children as Canadians. In our own growing up years in Prince George, my mother wanted us to be as robust as our playmates; she enriched the milk in our glasses with extra cream. My parents wanted us to take to heart the Canadian pastimes. They bought us skis to share among us. Every winter they bought us new used skates. There was a piano upstairs on which we learned to play

O Canada for school assemblies. There was a hockey net in the basement so my brothers could practice for the pond.

My parents wanted us to understand that we were part of Canada's future. They instilled the importance of an education. They encouraged us to believe that individuals could make a difference. I remember when Mr. and Mrs. Diefenbaker came to Prince George. I remember when a dashing Pierre Trudeau made his first visit. My parents made sure we were turned out to greet every visiting dignitary. My grandparents, in their time, were barred from government jobs. I, their granddaughter, would come to work as senior economic advisor to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.

I am now the mother of two young children. I want to pass on a sense of what it means to be a Canadian. But what worries me as a parent, and as a Canadian, is whether we can fashion an enduring concept of citizenship that will be the glue that holds us together as a society.

Curiously, Canadian citizenship elicits the most heartfelt response outside Canada. Any Canadian who has lived or traveled abroad quickly discovers that Canadian citizenship is a coveted possession. In the eyes of the rest of the world, it stands for an enlightened and gentle society.

Can we find a strong concept of citizenship that could be shared by all Canadians when we stand on our own soil? Some would say it is unrealistic to expect a symbol to rise out of a rather pragmatic past. We spilled no revolutionary blood, as did France- where the word citizen was brought into popular usage - or America. Some lament the absence of a founding myth; we don't have the equivalent of a Boston Tea Party. Others long for Canadian versions of heroes to compete with the likes of American images that occupy our living rooms and our playgrounds.

The one Canadian symbol with universal recognition is the flag. But where does the maple leaf strike a chord? Outside Canada. On the back packs of Canadian travelers. Of late, in Great Britain and Ireland, flying from the masts of boats and local fishermen as a show of support for Canada in its turbot dispute with Spain.

Some say Canadian citizenship is devalued because it is too easy to come here. But what sets Canadian society apart from others is that ours is an inclusive society. Canada's citizenship act remains more progressive than many countries. Canadians by immigration have equal status with Canadians by birth. In contrast, in Western Europe, guest workers, even if they descended from those who originally came, can be sent home any time. In Japan, Koreans and Filipinos have no claim to the citizenship of their birth. The plight of the Palestinians in Kuwait after the Gulf War gave the lie to a free Kuwait.

Canadian citizenship recognizes differences. It praises diversity. It is what we as Canadians *choose* to have in common with each other. It is a bridge between those who left something to make a new home here and those born here. What keeps the bridge strong is tolerance, fairness, understanding, and compassion. Citizenship has rights and responsibilities. I believe one responsibility of citizenship is to use that tolerance, fairness, understanding and compassion to leaf through the Canadian family album together.

My family story is about one family living on two sides of the globe, in a village in China and in the Chinatowns of the west coast of Canada. I knew I had to understand my grandparents' difficult and tangled decision to leave China for an unknown land. I had to understand the cultural baggage they brought, in order to see what they shed along the way and what they preserved. I had to see what they created anew as they acquired western sensibilities.

I also had to open the windows on the old Chinatowns in Canada. I had first to chip away at the layers of paint that stuck them shut, so intent had the former inhabitants been on shutting out inquiry. Some wondered why I'd want to write the story of my grandfather, who came a peasant and lived out his days alone in a rooming house. And why my grandmother, who lived by the wages and wits that came with being a *kay toi neu*? I see no honor lost in laying down the truth of their lives. It re-visits the once harsh verdict I myself had.

The same holds true for other leaves of the Canadian album. Often, the only ones whose memory is preserved are those who either prayed or worked hard, or both. But others are just as real, if not more so, with their strengths and weaknesses, triumphs and foibles. My story happens to take place in dingy rooming houses, alleyways and mah jong parlors in decaying Chinatowns. The backdrop of others may be the church basement, the union hall, school or hockey rink, or even the front porch. These stories, like mine, serve to illuminate Canada's social history.

How we tell our stories is the work of citizenship. The motive of the storyteller should be to put the story first. To speak with authenticity and veracity is to choose narrative over commentary. It is not to glorify or sentimentalize the past. It is not to sanitize our differences. Nor to rail against or to seek compensation today for injustices of bygone times. In my opinion, to try to rewrite history leads to a sense of victimization. It marginalizes Canadians. It backs away from equality in our society, for which we have worked hard to find expression.

I believe our stories ultimately tell the story of Canada itself. In all our pasts are an immigrant beginning, a settler's accomplishments and setbacks, and the confidence of a common future. We all know the struggle for victory, the dreams and the lost hopes, the pride and the shame. When we tell our stories, we look in the mirror. I believe what we will see is that Canada is not lacking in heroes. Rather, the heroes are to be found within.

The work of citizenship is not something just for the week that we celebrate citizenship every year. It is part of every breath we take. It is the work of our lifetimes.

The world is changing, and changing fast. People's lives are on the move. We travel more. We move to take new jobs, to find a bigger house, to live next to the schools we want our children to go to, to find a smaller house when they've grown up and left home. Families are far-flung, even to different continents. Children may have more than one home, a parent in each. Few of us as adults live in or can even re-visit our childhood home. Some of us cannot even return to the neighborhoods of our childhood and find the landscape familiar.

There are political pressures that could redefine Canada as we know it. Canadians continue to debate the future of the federation and question whether the country is governable. A growing regionalism could fracture the national interest. On a global scale, the trend is integration,

economically and culturally. The availability and dominance of American culture crowds our ability as Canadians to find the time and space to preserve our own culture and to share it with each other. Clicking the remote control and finding the television show of our choice is a display of our consumerism, not our Canadianism. Somehow, in this rapidly changing, busy world, we have to satisfy the emotional longing for roots, for understanding who we are, and what we are.

If we do some of this work of citizenship, we will stand on firmer ground. Sharing experience will help build strength of character. It will explain our differences, yet make them less divisive. We will yell at each other less, and understand each other more. We will find a sense of identity and a common purpose. We will have something to hand down to the next generation.

My grandfather's act of immigration to the new world and the determination of my grandmother, the girl who first came here as a *kay toi neu*, to chance the journey from China back to Canada so that my mother could be born here, will stand as a gift to all future generations of my family. Knowing they came hoping for a better life makes it easy to love both them and this country.

In the late 1980s, I would find myself in China, on a two-year stint living in Peking and working as a writer. In a letter to my mother right. I stopped such contrivances. I was in Prince George, I confessed that, despite the predictions of friends back in Canada, I was finding it difficult to feel any Chineseness. My mother wrote back: "You're Canadian, not Chinese. Stop trying to feel anything." She was right. I stopped such contrivances. I was Canadian; it was that which embodied the values of my life.

Source: Denise Chong, "Being Canadian," in *Canadian Speeches: Issues of the Day*, vol.9, no.2 (May 1995), 17-22.

Now that you have completed reading “Survival”, “Dear Sam” and “Being Canadian” choose one of the readings to complete the following.

In a separate paragraph, express your thoughts and opinions about the article. Select outside sources to defend your opinion(s). (At least 2)

Provide the links and/or research in your response.

Conclude with thought provoking questions/critical questions to ask your classmates about their thoughts on the topic. (At least 3)

Paragraph-(proper syntax)

Content-(opinions are clearly expressed and there is a clear use of 2 outside sources to defend the opinion stated)

Questions-(student has included at least 3 questions that are critical thinking questions)