

Swallowing Clouds

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

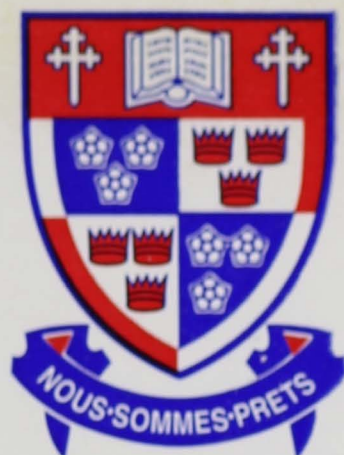


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Anthology of Chinese-Canadian Poetry

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Edited by
ANDY QUAN & JIM WONG-CHU



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An Anthology of
Chinese-Canadian
Poetry

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ANDY QUAN &
JIM WONG-CHU



ARSENAL PULP PRESS
Vancouver

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Fred Wah



FRED WAH was born in Swift Current, Saskatchewan in 1939, and grew up in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. He studied at the University of British Columbia in the early 1960s where he was one of the founding editors of the poetry newsletter *TISH*. After graduate work in literature and linguistics at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and the

State University of New York at Buffalo, he returned to the Kootenays in the late 1960s where he was the founding co-ordinator of the writing program at David Thompson University Centre. He now teaches at the University of Calgary. He has been editorially involved with a number of literary magazines over the years, such as *Open Letter* and *West Coast Line*. He has published seventeen books of poetry. His book of prose-poems, *Waiting For Saskatchewan*, received the Governor General's Award in 1986 and *So Far* was awarded the Stephanson Award for Poetry in 1992. *Diamond Grill*, a biofiction about hybridity and growing up in a small-town Chinese-Canadian café, was published in 1996 and won the Howard O'Hagan Award for Short Fiction.

ArtKnot Thirty Six

Looks like the Angel got through. Wrapped.
Swaddled. In between the rock and the river.

Seen speaking as having been given mere fact.
Mirroring on the wall, *not me*, begrunden.

Watch who'd turned us round, turning and stopping
forever taking leaves from the bottom of the tree.

Spectacle of Mrs. Erickson's totem. Private parts.
Thread round desire like a crack through the cup.

Stare, stare—nothing there. Camp. Earth. House.
Poof! said the beak. Not a ripple. By a hair.

ArtKnot Forty Nine

the steps
for flavour

(a little) sleight of tongue
impossibly meant itself

puente questo
the "you" that shadows every cloud

but it is possible
nothing at all happens

is it not it
the storm the mind

some trill remembered
crests the labial beach

no hay paso

ArtKnot Sixty Nine

what goes up
as they . . .
Hey sailor
wanna
see me
in the third
person let
the rivers run
let the semen
flower far
out in the open
ranging from
here to kingdom
come around
again some
time we could
try that dance
you know the one

Music at the Heart of Thinking One Oh Eight

Now I know I have a heart because it's broken but should I fix it now to
keep it strokin, or should I hear each piece as it is spoken and stoke heart,s
heat so hot I smell it smokin, or could this clock made up of parts be jokin,
that missing spark a mis-read gap provokin, and little sock of baby breath
not chokin, the piggy bank of words much more than tokens not just the
gossip love is always cloaked in nor all the meaning text is usually soaked in
but roast potatoes for a tender button so much depends upon the things
unspoken and if the heart is just this clock around which clusters all that,s
not and if the of and to an in that it is I for be was as can set these el em en t,s
far apart so all the floods are fierce and floral fl,s and hasten slowly stops me
at my selves right now I,ll have an egg because I know its yolks inside and
what I have to do is crack it open.

Music at the Heart of Thinking One Two Seven

No mass is without something else, something added, other. The one and the many. Taste is a gradation of foreignicity: we come across some abandoned specific with the realization that it isn't represented in the sphere of culture surrounding us. These particles of recognition and desire, subalterns and alternatives, solids that could melt into air, are what we use to intervene and domesticate those homogeneous aggregates of institution and industry that surround us.

The shoulders of eating, the sack full of ginger, the Blakean beach, the other word at the end of the word, the curl from kulchur, the grade for the course, the genome in their home, the rap at the door, the spoon full of the rice, the chop for the lick, the tongue in a knot, the circuits of surplus, the milk on the way, the valley and then the valley, the time of the day, the middle of world.

Race, to go

What's yr race

and she said

what's yr hurry

how 'bout it cock

asian man

I'm just going for curry.

You ever been to ethn-city?

How 'bout multi-culti?

You ever lay out skin

for the white gaze?

What are you, banana

or egg? Coconut

maybe?

Something wrong Charlie

Chim-chong-say-wong-lung-chung?

You got a slant to yr marginal eyes?

You want a little rice with that garlic?

Is this too hot for you?

Or slimy or bitter or smelly or tangy or raw or sour

—a little too dirty

on the edge ~~hiding underneath~~ crawling up yr leg stuck

between the fingernails?

Is that a black hair in yr soup?

Well how you wanna handle this?

You wanna maintain a bit of differ-énce?

Keep our mother's other?

Use the father for the fodder?

What side of John A. MacDonald's tracks you on anyway?

How fast you think this train is going

to go?

Words for Prairie

nose for alfalfa
and sage hills
distant
all that
the eye can

daughter
beside me
not looking,
looking

why get it
just right
here?

Whenever I open up for him (so he

can sleep in) early morning's dark eternal neon Wurlitzer shadowing the empty booths detonates with kicking the kitchen door a starting-pistol crack all through the café I know I'm both only me and all of me at full stride up the aisle with clean cotton coffee-filter sacks and an arm-load of saucers echoed ache of brass plate in my leg eternal, ready Freddy, open up with a good swift toe to the wooden slab that swings between the Occident and Orient to break the hush of the whole café before first light the rolling gait with which I ride this silence that is a hyphen and the hyphen is the door.

On the edge of Centre. Just off Main.

Chinatown. The cafés, yes, but further back, almost hidden, the ubiquitous Chinese store—an unmoving stratus of smoke, dusky and quiet, clock ticking. Dark brown wood paneling, some porcelain planters on the windowsill, maybe some goldfish. Goldfish for Gold Mountain men. Not so far, then, from the red carp of their childhood ponds. Brown skin stringy salt-and-pepper beard polished bent knuckles and at least one super-long fingernail for picking. Alone and on the edge of their world, far from the centre, no women, no family. This kind of edge in race we only half suspect as edge. A gap, really. Hollow.

I wander to it, tagging along with my father or with a cousin, sent there to get a jar of some strange herb or balm from an old man who forces salted candies on us or digs for a piece of licorice dirtied with grains of tobacco from his pocket, the background of old men's voices sure and argumentative within this grotto. Dominoes clacking. This store, part of a geography, mysterious to most, a migrant haven edge of outpost, of gossip, bavardage, foreign tenacity. But always in itself, on the edge of some great fold.

In a room at the back of the Chinese store, or above, like a room fifteen feet over the street din in Vancouver Chinatown, you can hear, amplified through the window, the click-clacking of mah-jong pieces being shuffled over the table tops. The voices from up there or behind the curtain are hot-tempered, powerful, challenging, aggressive, bickering, accusatory, demeaning, bravado, superstitious, bluffing, gossipy, serious, goading, letting off steam, ticked off, fed up, hot under the collar, hungry for company, hungry for language, hungry for luck, edgy.

His half-dream in the still-dark breathing silence is

the translation from the bitter-green cloudiness of the winter melon soup in his dream to the sweet-brown lotus root soup he knows Shu will prepare later this morning for the Chinese staff in the café. He moves the taste of the delicate nut-like lotus seeds through minor degrees of pungency and smokiness to the crunchy slices of lotus root suspended in the salty-sweet beef broth. This silent rehearsal of the memory of taste moves into his mind so that the first language behind his closed eyes is a dreamy play-by-play about making beef and lotus root soup. Simple: a pound of short ribs and a pound of lotus root in a small pot of water with some soy sauce and salt, a little sliced ginger, maybe a few red Chinese dates. Shu will surely touch it with a piece of dried tangerine peel because it's close to Christmas. He feels his tongue start to move as his mouth waters at the palpable flavour of words.

Marta AnLin Alps
Louise Bak
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Jim Wong-
Chu
Kam Sein Yee
Paul Yee

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In the tradition of *Many-Mouthed Birds*, the acclaimed fiction anthology by Chinese-Canadian writers, *Swallowing Clouds* gathers the work of some of the most vibrant and exciting Chinese-Canadian poets working today, the first such anthology ever published in book form.

These poems evoke the spirit and sentiment of the Chinese-Canadian community in all of its various forms and guises, representing a diversity of language and style that speak to issues of ethnicity and culture while forging new and exciting paths of their own.

Andy Quan's poems and stories have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies.

Jim Wong-Chu is the co-editor of *Many-Mouthed Birds* and the author of the poetry collection *Chinatown Ghosts*.

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