

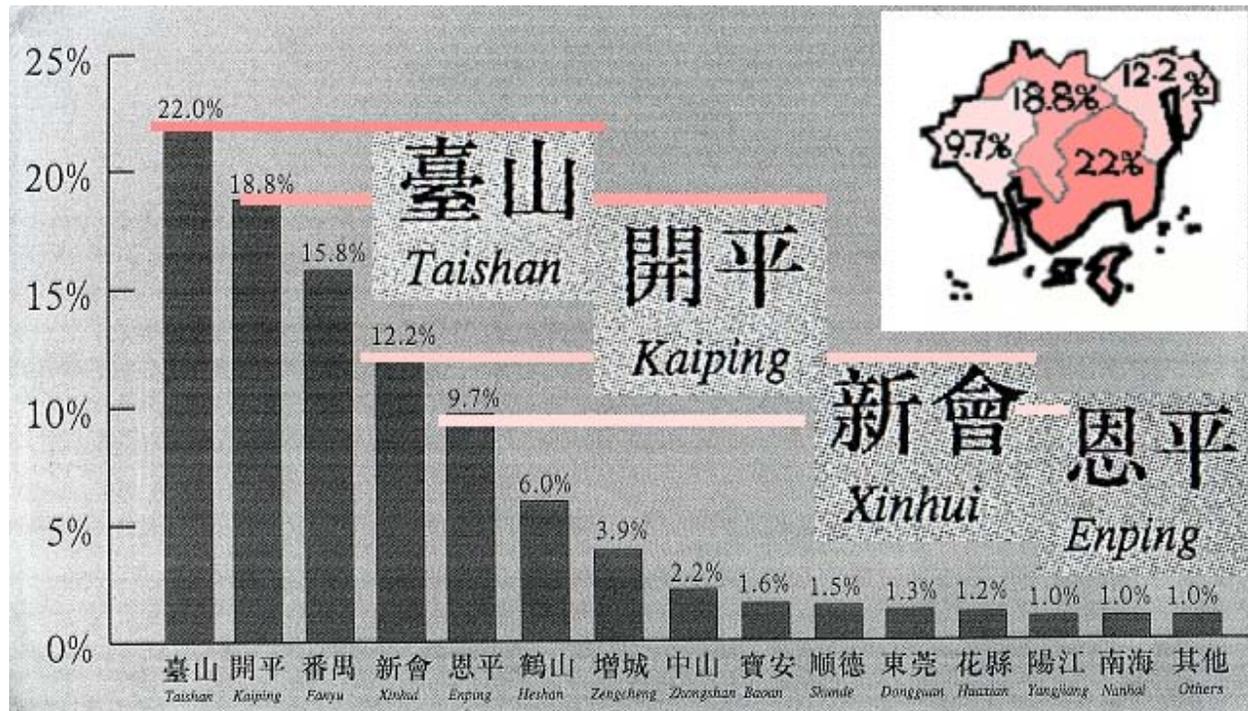
Who Built the Canadian Pacific Railway? Chinese Workers from Hoisan

Josie Chan

Traditional Canadian historiography, at least until the Charter of Rights and Freedoms of 1982 spurred a more multicultural mandate, has excluded immigrant and aboriginal stories told by themselves. There are Chinese voices in the academy now, but they speak only from a post-World War II perspective. This is a laudable step towards recognizing racial diversity, but racial diversity is not only visual (red, yellow, black, white and brown) but also linguistic. Within each ethnic category there is a sonic diversity. The post-war presentation of Chinese in Canadian history imposes the Cantonese dialect, but in reality Chinese immigrants spoke and still speak a variety of different dialects. The voices of Chinese railroad workers are scarce in Canada in part because of an oversimplification of a complex sonic diversity. Most of them came from a region in South China that had numerous dialects. In particular, it is significant that the majority of labourers employed in building the Canadian Pacific Railway through the Rockies spoke dialects other than Cantonese. (Lai, 1977).

Most Chinese who worked on the Canadian Pacific Railway in Alberta and British Columbia came from the region of Hlee Yep (*aka* Sze Yi or Sei Yup)

in South China. Hlee Yep comprises Four Districts along the southern belly of China and the Pearl River Delta and is geographically the most distant region from Guangzhou (Canton). Hlam Yep, in contrast, comprises the three counties closest to Gong Jiu, and it consequently enjoys economic benefits derived from its proximity to the capital. Within Hlee Yep the county furthest from urban economic benefit was Hoisan (*aka* Taishan or Toisan), and consequently its people led the exodus to Gold Mountain. Residents from the Hlee Yep region comprised 62.7% of the Chinese CPR workforce. By contrast, only 2.5% of the same workforce came from Hlam Yep. The dialect that Hlam Yep people speak has been simplified to ‘Cantonese’ (or ‘provincial speech’) whereas the Hlee Yep dialects are generally referred to as Hoisan Wah, Hoisanese or simply Hoisan. Hoisan was the dominant sound in North American Chinatowns until the mid-1960s, but while statistics exist on Cantonese and Mandarin speakers in Canada today there are none on Hoisan speakers. Hoisan thus represents a significant gap in the soundscape of Canadian culture and history.



62.7% of Chinese CPR workers were from the Four Districts of Hlee Yep (Li, 2000, 14, with my highlights and inset map)

Hoisan dialects are presented in various transliterations throughout the English literature about Gold-Mountain. There can easily be confusion in the transliteration from Chinese to English because of the use of three different dialects by the transcribers (namely, Mandarin, Cantonese and Taishanese). The follow-

ing table gives the Hoisan (Taishanese) equivalents to names previously transliterated using national [Mandarin pinyin] and provincial [Cantonese, various systems] dialects. In transliterated Mandarin Taishanese (or Taishan Hua) is the equivalent term for Hoisanese (or Hoisan Wah).

Dialect of Chinese [usage] Name in the literature	Mandarin [national] Putonghua	Cantonese [provincial] Yue dialect	Taishanese [county] No name
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拼音 Transcription system	pinyin	Wade-Giles	Non-standard
話 Term for 'dialect'	Hua	Wah	Wah
台山 County in Hlee Yep	Taishan	Toysan	Hoisan
開平 County in Hlee Yep	Kaiping	Hoi Ping	Hoi Ping
新會 County in Hlee Yep	Xinhui	Sun Wui	Hlen Woy
恩平 County in Hlee Yep	Enping	Yun Ping	Yen Ping
四邑 Four Counties	Szē Yi	Sei Yup	Hlee Yep
廣東 Canton Province	Guangdong	Canton	Gong Oong
廣州 Provincial capitol	Guangzhou	City of Canton	Gong Jiu
金山 Golden Mountain	Jin Shan	Gam Saan	Gim San
華僑 Glorious Bridge/ Overseas Chinese	Wah Qiao	Wah Kew	Wah Kew
唐人街 Tang People's Street/ Chinatown	Tang ren jie	Tong Yan Gai	Hong Gnen Gai

Most present-day popular representations of Chinese railroad builders conspicuously omit any reference to the Hoisan dialect. In its place one finds either Can-

tonese or English. The majority of Chinese railroad workers' descendants in Canada now speak English. In their search for roots, they will encounter many

stories of injustice and discrimination, such as those scrawled on the walls of the Victoria Detention Centre and that on Angel Island in the USA. Another form of discrimination has been the suppression of their families' original language. To rectify this omission it is important to ensure that the Hoisan dialect of the railroad builders is heard again.

So far this has rarely been the case. The works in the table below by writers of Chinese descent initiated the discussion about early Chinese immigrants in North America. However, none of the works mentioned in the top portion of the second column of this table use the Hoisan dialect, although it was in fact the dominant voice of the railroad builders.

Works about Chinese	Works by Chinese	Works by Chinese railroad builders
Royal Commission 1884 Parliamentary Debates <i>White Canada Forever</i> Pierre Berton Tim Rogers	<i>In the Shadow of Gold Mountain</i> <i>Ghost Train</i> <i>Dragon's Gate</i> <i>Iron Road</i> <i>Canadian Steel, Chinese Grit</i> <i>China Men</i> <i>On Gold Mountain</i> Angel Island Victoria Detention Centre <i>Songs of Gold Mountain</i>	Wong Hau Hon
Works about Hoisanese	Works by Hoisanese	Works by Hoisan railroad builders
<i>Eighth Promise</i>	Uncle Ng Victoria Detention Centre <i>Songs of Gold Mountain</i> Angel Island	?

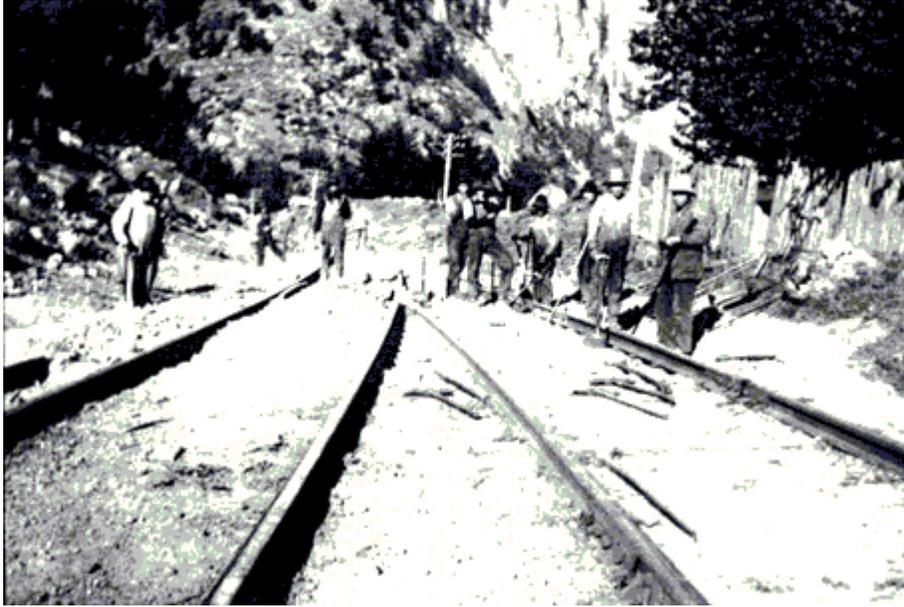
Chinese immigrant stories in the anglophone North American Media

Ignoring the Hoisanese dialect results in an inadequate representation in this literature of railroad builders such as those shown in the photograph on

the following page. For example, current English-language works re-imagining their history include Paul Yee's play *Ghost Train* and Cahn Ka-Nin's op-

era *Iron Road*. Both works are based on primary sources (the personal documents of Chinatown residents before the Head Tax era), and both equitably and imaginatively portray females in leading roles. Yet although they are valuable and in some ways

authentic voices from the recent past, they are not the voices of railway workers themselves. For that one must look elsewhere. This is the story of my own search to find those voices.



Chinese Construction Workers Building Track in the Canadian Rockies

While attending Freedom Asian Arts School in the summer of 2006,¹ I saw the National Film Board documentary, *In the Shadow of Gold Mountain*, made by Karen Cho in 2003. This is a well-contextualized personal history in which a third-generation half-Chinese film director travels on the Canadian Pacific Railway to find her roots. Along the way, she encounters an old paw-paw (grandmother) whose Hoisan complaints are subtitled in English. This is believable, as I have met many a complaining Hoisan paw-paw. But during childhood visits to the Oxford Street Seniors' Home, I would also hear tapes of Chinese songs. Yet there is no Chinese or Chinese-Canadian music in the film, just a 1920s flapper tune and a choir from a seniors' home singing "O Canada". As an ethnomusicology student, I was surprised and very disappointed by this omission. The Chinese seniors' home's chorus singing "O Canada" sounded more like a plea for state recognition, rather than an assertion of cultural traditions or proud music-making to earn public appreciation. How could this well-intentioned film-maker overlook the musical voice of Chinese Canada? After all, Cantonese operas are well-documented in Victoria's Chinatown since 1925. No doubt many Hoisan speakers did listen to and embrace the dominant musical culture of Canada, especially in public, and even in private Hoisanese did not necessarily express themselves through tradi-

tional song. But they nonetheless possessed a distinct musical culture of their own, and we need to research and reconstruct this as best we can.

Just as the Chinese railroad builders contributed to Canada as a nation, Chinese artists and professionals are continuing that contribution, although they are still relatively silent. However, more works have been forthcoming that are breaking the stereotype of the silent Chinese. The play *Ghost Train* (Yee, 1996) helped to break the silence, but what was heard was English and Cantonese, not Hoisanese. Similarly, the opera *Iron Road* (Chan, 2000), and the documentary *Canadian Steel, Chinese Grit* (Li, 2000), equate Cantonese, rather than Hoisanese, with the spoken Chinese of the railroad builders. The documentary that circulated in five Toronto middle schools to accompany viewings of *Iron Road* erroneously and rather nostalgically laid a Cantonese reading of a poem over a classic Cantonese opera track. This collision of nostalgic sentiment and inaccurate dialect is abhorrent to my ears. Moreover, *Iron Road* is primarily the voice of a Chinatown merchant from Sam Yup (The Three Districts), which was closer to the capitol of Guangzhou than Hlee Yep (Sei Yup, or The Four Districts). But why slight the Hoisanese dialect when it has been integral to the construction of this country? Those poverty-stricken farmers turned railway labourers did the most difficult work and still they receive the least

credit for it. How ironic that today's Cantonese-speaking Chinese community is perpetuating in itself the very same lack of recognition that CPR foremen gave to their Chinese workers! This is surely based on an urban prejudice which labels Hoisan people as intolerant 'rednecks', or at the very least cultureless 'country bumpkins'. These socio-economic differences are, to say the least, problematic when they distort history in this way.

The problem is not limited to these four works. Another example is a novel which romanticizes the railroading experience, *China Men* by Maxine Hong-Kingston (1989). Moreover, in writings that transcribe Chinese poems and translate them into English and in other accounts of the early Chinese immigrant experience, the transliterations of Chinese names and places are in Cantonese. To use present-day audiences' language to pronounce voices of the past is an anachronistic error. These compilations may have sought an audience in the most powerful Chinese community, which happens to speak Cantonese (Li, 1993, 272-3), but there are phrases in the poems which do not exist in Cantonese although they do exist in Hoisan (Lai, 1991, 44 and 72). English furthermore not only does not give meaning to tones, but does not contain certain sounds, for example the IPA symbol for the Alveolar Lateral Fricative, which sounds something like 'hkl' and is often found in Hoisanese but rarely, if ever, in Cantonese. Where English readers are the audience, Chinese transliterations are toneless and lacking sounds not inherent in modern English. Again, Cantonese is more readily appropriated than Hoisan. By this demonstration of pronunciation differences, I mean to show that if there is dialectic difference, there is a cultural difference. The language of the cities cannot substitute for the language of the counties, since they each imply different environments and world views. In studying the history of Chinese Canadians it is therefore very important to fully appreciate both linguistic and cultural diversity.

Certain descendants of Hoisan people have become famous for assimilating into the dominant culture of the societies in which subsequent generations were raised. A prime example in Canada is the former Governor General of Canada, Adrienne Clarkson. Because her loss of roots is apparent in her loss of the Chinese language, her assertion of Chinese identity, if at all, is a pan-Chinese one. In generations of early Chinese immigration to Canada, it was certainly necessary to erase one's own Chineseness in order to gain economic advantage in Canada. Indeed, Chinese cultural self-erasure or at least temporary suppression of Chinese identity is still necessary in the majority of situations, notable exceptions being equity conferences or any business-in-China context.

Being so assimilated indicates that Clarkson's perspective does not differ from the dominant Canadian one, which is summarized in her own words:

The Chinese workers first came here for the railway, and they were forgotten people in many ways, because they didn't have a name, because they came in such huge numbers, because they were virtually indentured labour, like slaves, and they died in great numbers as well. But they contributed an enormous amount to the building of this country. Without the railway, you wouldn't have this country of Canada. (Li, 2000, 158).

How is this cultural erasure, albeit 'well-intentioned'? The problem is that it perpetuates the standard nationalist story of Canada's genesis: that Canada became a united nation *ab mari usque ad mare*, from Atlantic to Pacific, by the railroad, in the building of which these "beardless children of China" (Berton, 1971, 194) were paid wages in proportion to their perceived labour power. Of course, it is tragic that one Chinaman died for every mile of track laid, but that's a "Chinaman's chance" (Lee, 1984, 32), and this sacrifice was necessary to make Canada a great country.

Adrienne Clarkson's nationalist myth was not the true story of Chinese-Canadians. To show this I will deconstruct each assertion she makes. In fact Chinese immigrants came to North America before railroad construction. The Chinese call North America "Gold Mountain" (McCord, 2007; Chan, 1983), and it is no coincidence that the first wave of Chinese immigration was counted among the San Francisco Forty-Niners and the Fraser River Gold Rush of 1858. This was even recognized in discriminatory legislation that required only Chinese to purchase licenses to mine for gold (Chan, 1981-2). Despite this mistreatment, Chinese were still willing to stay and work. As of the Royal Commission of 1884, 10,492 Chinese workers were still in Canada. Seeing Chinese as a horde of invaders on White Canada (Ward, *White Canada Forever*) was a considerable concern for European immigrants fearing they would lose jobs to "cheap Chinese labour".² It was the fear of the 'Yellow Peril' that led to the establishment of labour unions in North America (Ward, 2002, 6).

Pierre Berton's celebrated account in *The Last Spike* of the completion of the Canadian Pacific railway also contributes to a myth that must be demolished. For example, he states:

He [Dr. George Pon of Toronto] never discovered exactly what it was his grandfather [Pong Git Cheng, houseboy of Benjamin Tingley Rogers of Vancouver] did on the railway – how he was hired, where he worked, or what he felt about the strange, raw land which was to become his home.

Such details were not set down and so are lost forever – lost and forgotten, like the crumbling bones that lie in unmarked graves beneath the rock and rubble high about the Fraser's angry torrent (Berton, 1971, 205).

In this way, by identifying a single railway worker's descendant and reporting that this individual does not know his family history, Berton sweepingly proclaims the death of any and all Chinese voices from the era. But we need not accept such *ex cathedra* pronouncements.

We find other distortions, as well as insights, in the relevant literature. Chinese-American authors re-imagine and insert dialect differences into English. The environments of Gold Mountain are made into metaphors. The meaning of the mountain is a place of hardship despite the promise of prosperity. For this reason the Sierra Nevada of Maxine Hong-Kingston's *China Men* could also be understood as the Rockies. It is different from the Chinatowns in Victoria, BC, or San Francisco, CA, however, which were not just bachelor societies, but ghettos with invisible boundaries.

William Poy Lee's *The Eighth Promise: An American Son's Tribute to His Toisanese Mother* delineates a Hoisan adaptability in contrast to an exploitative Chinatown one. Is this perhaps a little naïve? Is it not idealistic to say that exploitation was rare in Hoisanese agricultural life? For the farm was no idyllic pastoral. From 1851 to 1908, the Pearl River Delta was struck by the aftermath of the Opium War, colonization, famine, natural disasters, a doubled population in thirty years, poverty and roving gangs. Though the local Chinese were not slaves, captured to go to Gold Mountain, the choice they faced was hard. You could die with your family in the village or die in a foreign country. If you had a hope of surviving in either place, at least a trip to Gold Mountain opened a small window of opportunity, a chance perhaps to return home to village-wide acclaim, with enough money to fortify your village watchtowers and put those durable ebony beams in your home.

In reality, home may have been but a distant memory for the Chinese hired for their cheap rate of labour³ and made to do the most dangerous jobs, including lighting dynamite to blast through the mountains. Conservative estimates say one died for every mile of track laid, but other estimates say the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) under-reported casualties, and a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation report (Rose, 1984) says it may have been four per mile; the Chinese-Canadian National Council does not doubt that it was ten.

There is no material evidence of singing among these workers, possibly because they were not literate enough to transcribe their own songs, nor in possession of a wax cylinder recording machine, nor did they have an ethnographer interested in transcribing them, as later happened on the West Coast with Marius Barbeau's mission to record what he thought was a dying culture.⁴ There are inevitably problems in language translation and cultural transition, but to overcome this involves some knowledge of fundamental beliefs and artistic forms from the other culture. In Chinese culture, classically speaking, music is in large part merely tolerated, whereas poetry is a highly revered art form. It combines the skills of calligraphy and an ear for rhyme and rhythm, and serves as a badge of the privileged educated class. From what I understand, Chinese poetry forms the basis of Cantonese opera libretti. The songs of CPR workers under the Onderdonk contract may have surfaced in the many Cantonese opera productions of the 1920s in Victoria, British Columbia. But what form did they take? Whereas stanzas in English-language classical poetry are in lines with an even number of syllables, Chinese classical poetry is typically in groups of three, five, and seven syllables. Laurence Yep's *Dragon's Gate* incorrectly imagines a poem in even meter, whereas the poems found scrawled on the walls of the Victoria BC detainment centre (1920s-40s) retain the uneven meter of classical poetry. Thankfully the original walls were rescued from demolition by David S. Lai and are now on public display in the basement of the Royal Ontario Museum. In the USA, Angel Island Detention Centre's Chinese graffiti are similar in form and content (Lai, Lim and Yung, 1980). The comparison between products of US detention centers and Canadian detention centres is not far-fetched, considering that they housed early Chinese migrants from a shared home: the district of Hlee Yep. Before CPR construction, many workers hired under Onderdonk came from Chinatowns in the United States; after the Last Spike, the CPR had no money to pay for workers' fare back to China, and many Chinese workers who survived returned to the US to earn a living.

Knowing this, Paul Yee, author of *Ghost Train*, referred me to a 1910/1911 anthology from San Francisco, edited by Marlon Hom as *Songs of Gold Mountain* (Berkeley: 1992). Some of the contributors to this amateur San Francisco Chinatown poetry anthology may have previously been CPR workers. At this point in time, however, that is uncertain since contributors to the anthology were anonymous (at the time of publication), and none of the poems selected by Hom were concerned with the railroad nor with aspects of railroad construction. Interestingly, I did find one reference to Canada. In piece 311, "Songs of

the Hundred Man's Wife", as translated by Hom, a 'native-born from Canada' is a simile for a 'charming young lass'. But when I emailed Hom about this in 2007 he confirmed my observation: to his knowledge there are no mentions of the railroad in any Chinese-language poetry anthologies written in North America.

A possible reason for railroad songs not being transmitted from one generation to another is because the experience was too traumatic. The trauma of seeing so many neighbours and close relatives die so quickly and seemingly unvalued would be quite enough to shut the railroad out of one's thoughts. In order to survive, workers could not mourn nor even bury their dead, let alone meditate on the experience to create songs. This trauma leaves a complex absence. By underfunding research on the songs of past immigrants, Canada's history perpetuates a discriminatory historical error. Both Adrienne Clarkson and Pierre Berton are voices for the Canadian perspective portraying subtle racist attitudes, whereas Ward in *White Canada Forever* presents blatant racism from early British Columbia. As Ward quotes: "[Wing Chung] Ng rightly points out that studies of racism can contribute relatively little to an understanding of the immigrant experience" (Ward, xxv). As historians and musicologists we need to understand the Canadian immigrant experience more clearly, in more detail, and in more depth. To do so we must become more culturally sensitive and also eliminate all vestiges of racism from Canadian historiography. This can be done: in fact some researchers have already begun rediscovering the Chinese of Canada. Julia Ningyu Li, for example, has found the names of five notable descendants of railway workers: Arthur Lee, Douglas Jung, Bing Thom, Peter Wing, and Bevan Jangze. And Him Mark Lai has discovered not only the name of a railroad worker, Wong Hau Hon, but also his prose (Lai, 1971).

So is it a futile exercise to search for these songs from an era dating back for nearly a century and a half? No. But to battle current stereotypes requires either a critical mass of currently active Gold Mountain (Hoisanese-North-American) musicians and/or some very strong evidence from the past to prove the existence of such a language group and its cultural contribution to this country. And where are the authentic songs of the railroad workers themselves?

Even though much ink has been spilled about Chinese by both Chinese and non-Chinese, the voice of the workers themselves is apparently not on the record. Yet I just cannot believe that the Hoisanese labourers sang no songs while working. Hence to find the sounds of these workers requires further research. To begin with, as we have seen, omitting the Hoisa-

nese dialect results in an inadequate representation of the railroad builders. However, there are some hopeful signs that this can be overcome. For example, Hoisanese has been recognized by the American National Heritage Fellowship awarded to Ng Sheung-Chi, otherwise known as Uncle Ng, in 1991. He was recognized in China and toured under the auspices of Mao's folksong project during the Cultural Revolution.⁵ Although his muk'yu (poems) are concerned with his immigrant experience, he does not mention the industries in which his fellow immigrants worked, so there are no specific mentions of railway building. The lyrics of muk'yu and other styles of poetry scrawled on the walls of the Victoria Detention Centre and Angel Island have much in common, namely, the uneven meter, structure, rhyming scheme, and the Hoisanese dialect. With more persistent digging, the buried treasure of railroad song may be unearthed one day, and the descendants of the Hoisanese railroad builders may finally experience a surge of special and personal pride by being singled out from the pan-Chinese sea.

The history of the Chinese railroad builders cannot be separated from the history of Canada. Canada is a nation of immigrants and settlers. We must learn to value this diversity. In so doing, we enable Canada to reach the full potential of its multicultural human resources. The highly developed anti-racist policies in Canada should be understood and not forgotten. We should recognize the continuing injustices today. Chinese have been considered a silent labour force (Jo, 1984) and hence without an expressive culture. Without culture they are not deemed human.

I seek to humanize these Chinese immigrants to a Western and Canadian audience. I realize that my role as the subaltern (Spivak, 1888, quoted in Wong, 2004, 305) runs the risk of overpowering those I seek to voice. This can be avoided by rediscovering the voices of the railroad builders themselves. They have not yet been located, but the recent discovery and republication of Wong Hau Hon's *Reminiscences of a Railroad Worker* (1926, in Yung et al. 2006) suggests that more voices may be found in the future. The only photographic evidence I have so far seen of music in Gold Mountain is from Julia Ningyu Li's *Canadian Steel, Chinese Grit*, where there is a picture of a worker playing a Chinese moon guitar outside a mountainside sod-house and a wood-plank cottage labeled 'laundry'. These two clues at least provide a starting-point for a new search for evidence.

Clearly bachelor societies did play music in the valleys of Gold Mountain. I want to hear them, and here I document a single step on a journey of a thousand miles.

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Notes

¹ Run by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Gein Wong.

² "In fact, there is such a want of white labor in British Columbia, that if you wish to have the railway finished within any reasonable time, there must be no such step against Chinese labor... At present it is simply a question of alternatives – either you must have this labor or you cannot have the railway." –Sir John A. MacDonald.

³ "We can't get it [the cross-Canada railroad] done without the Chinaman." – J.E.H McDonald.

⁴ The Kwakiutl was a catch-all term used in archives and Canadian administration from Barbeau's time until the 1980s to refer to all First Nations peoples of Vancouver Island, the straits between it and the mainland, and farther north, across the water from Haida Gwaii. Names in accordance with Aboriginal languages are now preferred. Therefore "Kwakiutl" actually refers to more than one First Nation. Kwakwaka'wakw is the preferred term today for the speakers of Kwakwaka. Those named Kwakiutl in the past also include the Haisla, Wuikinuxv (also named Owekeeno or Rivers Inlet people) and the Heiltsuk (also named Bella Bella people).

⁵ AAAC, 2007.