DOING HISTORY WITH WAH CHONG'S WASHING AND IRONING

ABSTRACT

Starting from a photograph of a Vancouver laundry establishment in 1884, this article explores fundamental concepts of historical thinking: historical evidence, historical significance, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspective-taking, and the moral dimension of historical investigation. It shows how these concepts can be used to generate the questions and strategies that underlie all of historical research, and thus that can be helpful in the history classroom.



City of Vancouver Archives BU P403 N387 #1, taken circa 1884.

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Around 1884, Wah Chong assembled his family in front of his laundry shop in Vancouver, and posed for the picture that survives today in the Vancouver Public Library's photograph collection. What uses can we make of a trace, an archived remnant, in opening up early British Columbia history? How can it help us to understand the process of doing history? At best, a small fragment of the past suggests conjectures and questions, rather than offering firm conclusions. This article uses six historical concepts to explore the picture and what it has to offer as a starting point for historical investigation. They demonstrate the potential for history as an active process, involving choices and decisions by the historian, teacher or student at every step of the way.

The Photograph as Evidence

The obvious starting point is the family. The father is sitting in the centre (an indication of patriarchy?) while the others stand, in front of his store. There is a mix of Asian and European legacies in this North American setting: the store sign is in English, but a sign with Chinese characters hangs in the window. The family's clothing is Asian, but someone must have spoken English in order to run a business for a non-Chinese clientele. Did they all speak English? Who wrote the sign? Three family members hold umbrellas, prepared for the rains of British Columbia. The wooden

sidewalk (elevating posers and walkers above a street of dirt) also locates the west coast scene in the town with an abundance of available lumber. The family's position suggests that they were all involved in the work of the laundry and ironing. Ironing! In this frontier outpost, who sent their clothing out to be pressed into straight creases?

The photograph, with the family alone, offers little evidence of Wah Chong's relations with the rest of the residents of Vancouver at the time. In what ways was the family isolated; what kinds of relations did they have with other Chinese immigrants and with non-Chinese communities? Was the photograph session, itself, one of the interactions between Chinese and non-Chinese? Whose purposes were realized in the production of the photograph? Who saved it and why? Some of these questions may not have answers.

Looking at this one photograph, we might use it as evidence of healthy Chinese-Canadian family life in early British Columbia. But that would be a potentially misleading direction. By juxtaposing this remnant with other fragments that survive by chance or in purposeful collections, in family memories and historians' analyses, we fill in more of the picture. With the railroad completed, the Canadian government moved to restrict Chinese immigration with a $50 head tax in 1885. This prohibited further growth of Chinese family life in Canada. It was now out of the question for an immigrant worker to bring an entire family along. An anti-Chinese riot in 1887 – sparked when lumber contractors brought 25 Chinese workers from Victoria to log a wooded property – drove out all the Chinese from Vancouver other than five laundrymen.[1] It is not clear what happened to Wah Chong in the attacks, but there are memories of his children, and theirs, who survived in Vancouver.[2]

In addition to the questions which this picture has already suggested as a piece of historical evidence, it is also possible to use it to open up other lines of questioning. Five other historical concepts – in addition to "evidence" – open up these lines: significance, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspective-taking, and moral judgment.[3]

The Significance of Wah Chong

The concept of significance leads us to ask whether, and how, the scene portrayed in this photograph is historically significant. Though Wah Chong may have been a power in his own family, personally, his actions did not have a deep effect over a long period of time on a large number of people (in the way that Winston Churchill could be said to be historically significant). Nor was his laundry the site of the signing of a declaration of war or a treaty of peace. Nevertheless, it connects to the history of Canada, as we now think about it. The fragment of a story suggested by his surviving photograph suggests a larger one of hardship, struggle, accomplishment and resilience. Moreover, it connects to the history of multicultural Canada in ways that are central to our current conception of the growth of this country. As we use the photograph to uncover this aspect of Canada's past, Wah Chong himself achieves significance. Like the photograph as evidence (which depended, for its status as evidence upon our questioning), Wah Chong's significance lies not only in his life, but in the way that we, as historians (and teachers and students), weave his life into larger themes of Canadian history.

Continuity and Change Since 1884

The linked historical concepts of continuity and change help to start to weave the larger story in a way that carries the ending into our own era. What has continued and what has changed, as we compare this photograph and the scene it depicts, to life in the present? The use of photography to provide records of the family unit continues against a backdrop of change in conventional poses, photographic technology, and the ease with which photographic images are circulated. The importance of family, and specifically, the importance of the extended family unit in providing the economic, social and emotional supports for new immigrants to Canada, is one aspect of continuity. But it can be set against change in the shape of families (does Wah Chong have a second wife in this photo?), the role of children in the workplace, and the growth of state institutions to provide some of those supports through new institutions. How did the overt racism of white Canadians towards the Chinese change through the 20th century? In what ways do race and racism still structure Canadian social relations? These questions suggest a further set of evaluative questions that are answered in terms of progress and decline. In what ways have Canadian race relations progressed; in what ways have they declined? Assessments of progress always depend on who is in the centre of the picture.

Cause and Consequence

Continuity and change lead to the fourth set of historical concepts, cause and consequence,

when we ask the question, "why?" The answers provide historical explanations. Consider the question of the race riot of 1887 that took place shortly after the pleasant scene depicted here. Its cause is not a simple matter. The forces of capitalism, where workers competed against each other in an unregulated labour market were certainly a factor. Some of the cause must be attributed to employers' willingness to cut costs by hiring Chinese workers at a fraction of what white workers were being paid. The racism of white workers is also part of the mix. Cause can be located in institutions, in ideologies, and in the actions of groups and individuals. When we move from a single incident in 1887, to the larger questions of continuity and change over the course of a century, explanations become exponentially more complex. Choices of emphasis result in historical explanations of very different kinds.

Historical Perspective-Taking

The world of Wah Chong and his family was in many ways unimaginably different from the world we know today. Is it possible for us to understand what he, his wife, his children, were thinking and feeling as they posed for this photograph? How did they conceive of themselves in this frontier society, and how can we imagine how they conceived of themselves, at a time before the terms "identity" or "racism" were used by anybody? The more evidence we have, the more we can reasonably infer what was going on for them, but the problem never vanishes. We always look at the past, with hindsight, through the lens of the present. The experiences of a recent Chinese immigrant family might provide some insight, but they have left a very different world behind, and have arrived in a very different Canada.

The Moral Dimension

Finally, we have to assess what the situation that surrounded the Wah Chong laundry means for us today. We can admire him and his family for his resilience and his bravery. Perhaps. But, if we have difficulty with historical perspective-taking, we take risks in such judgments. And if positive judgments are risky, so too are negative judgments about the racism of the white rioters, a racism that was part of the fabric of 19th century European thought. On the other hand, demands for compensation for the head tax, for memorials of exemplary lives, and commemoration of tragic events all *demand* that we come to grips with the moral implications of past crimes, sacrifices and heroism alike. Here, more than anywhere else, we see the implications for today of choices we make in making histories of the past.

Starting with a single photograph, a remnant of life in Vancouver in 1884, this short piece has used six concepts basic to historical thinking in order to open out directions for questioning and research. The dialectical interplay – between these fragments of the past and our own questions in the present – constitutes the high-stakes game of doing history.

Endnotes

1 Stephen M. Beckow, "Keeping British Columbia White: Anti-Orientalism in the Canadian West." *Canada's Visual History* CD-ROM, (Canadian Museum of Civilization and National Film Board, 1996).

2 Jennie Wah Chong, one of the children in the photograph, married Goon Ling Dang and had at least two children of whom there are traces from the 1920s and 30s. "One Family's Struggle," Vancouver Courier Online Edition, updated, April 23, 2001. http://www.vancourier.com/issues01/04401/ent2.htm, accessed 8/18/2006.

3 These concepts are defined by the "Benchmarks of Historical Thinking" Project, accessible through www.histori.ca after January, 2007.