Here and There:

RE/COLLECTING CHINESE CANADIAN HISTORY

ABSTRACT

By reflecting on a trip taken to Alert Bay, the author explores the question of Chinese Canadian history as part of BC's history and its relationship to that of Canada's. Documentary evidence, problems in its preservation, as well as the role of family and community oral histories, are considered.

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Although I have lived much of my life on the West Coast, I had never visited Alert Bay on Cormorant Island (one of the Northern Gulf Islands off of Vancouver Island, BC) until August 2006. In my mind, Alert Bay was synonymous with the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples and was for this very reason on my list of places to visit. But, through a colleague I was introduced to the fact that there had been a Chinese community sizable enough to be known as "Chinatown" (Figure 1). With my interest piqued, I put aside other tasks to make the trek. In doing so, I met one of the members of the last families who was part of this early Chinatown.



Mr. Skinner's delivery service in front of Wong Toy & Sons, Alert Bay, BC, undated. This is the general area where Chinese businesses (or "Chinatown") were located. Photo courtesy of Chuck T. Wong.

The Association for Canadian Studies conference, "Canada West to East," has given me an opportunity to reflect on this Alert Bay visit regarding BC and Canadian history. As someone who is probably more knowledgeable than many regarding Chinese Canadian history, why was I initially surprised at Alert Bay's Chinatown? As well, why did my contact there not know some of the basics about Chinese Canadian history? These twoquestions lead to intertwining themes worth addressing: the historic contribution of BC to Canada, the place of BC in Canada's history, and the challenge of teaching BC history. Examining early Chinese Canadian history brings these themes together.

History in BC, in Canada, as in many other western countries, is about those who were viewed as successes by the dominant society. As trite as the saying is, history for the most part has been about "famous dead white men." The supporting "actors" behind these men are those whose histories are missing, i.e., the labourers, the small businesses, the service people, etc. Without all those behind-the-scene players, the famous would not have garnered the fame that they did.

One of the more notable examples of this is the gathering of individuals depicted in the photograph of the "Last Spike" ceremony at Craigellachie, BC (Begg 1894:438). The directors of the Pacific Railway Company are surrounded by officials and labourers. Only European faces are shown even though "hundreds of workmen of all nationalities who had been engaged in the mountains, were present" (Begg 1894:439). Chinese labour was critical in the timely completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). Many a book or article on the topic includes this particular photograph; yet to the casual viewer, all those shown suggest that those who built

the railway were only of European ancestry. In contrast, how many have seen the documentary, *Canadian Steel, Chinese Grit* (Lee 1998), or the Chinese Canadian opera, *Iron Road* (Brownell 2001), which give another perspective of the work and the conditions faced by Chinese? One could even query how many are even aware of the existence of these resources. In terms of the numbers of Chinese involved in the railway, figures suggest that "over 17,000 Chinese immigrants [came] in the four years of railway construction" (Wickberg 1988:22).

Clearly, this was no small number of individuals. Census data from 1881 list the total number of males in BC as 29,503; of those, 4,350 were Chinese (see Roy 1989:269). In the next census, 1891, the numbers basically double. Since the CPR was completed in 1885, not all who came to work stayed; but, those who did remained primarily in BC.

For this reason, the history of the Chinese in BC is synonymous with that of Chinese in Canada. Roy's table (1989:269) of the Chinese population in Canada and BC from 1881-1911, adapted below, illustrates this point:

Chinese in Canada and BC, 1881-1891

Year	Canada	BC	%
1881	4,383	4,350	99.24
1891	9,129	8,910	97.6
1901	16,375	14,201	86.72
1911	27,774	19,568	70.45

Only in the 1951 census is the Chinese population in BC less than 50% of the total Chinese in Canada (Wickberg 1982:302). Any discussion about the early history of Chinese in Canada *must* be derived from BC.

What do we know of those who stayed to make BC (and Canada) home? This becomes one of the challenges of teaching Chinese Canadian history. Where are the teaching materials? Chinese Canadians represent for the most part those who were viewed as "behind-the-scene" historically; thus, records (arrival, birth, marriage, death) may exist with some searching but daily life experience is minimal. That documentation also is not always obvious (see Yu's comments on the General Register of Head Tax Certificates [2006:77-78]). As noted by Lim, in the 1881 census of Victoria "[g]ender and age were the only identification for 1,931 individuals who were listed as 'Chinaman,' Chinawoman,' 'Chinaboy,' or 'Chinagirl' " (2002:20). Individuals disappear to become just one mass. The question remains as to who they actually were. "Almost no Chinese records or diaries have been found that survive from that time" (building of the CPR) (Wickberg 1982:22). This may be true in Canada, but letters and photographs to families in China may still exist.

In the past few years, collections of photographs from the early part of the 20th century in BC have become more widely known, such as, those of C.D. Hoy in Quesnel (Moosang 1999) and the Hayashi/Kitamura/Matsubuchi Studio in Cumberland (Thomson 2005). Some of these images, no doubt, were sent to family members in the old country and were the reason for their existence – to affirm health and well-being from afar. Denise Chong (1994) in her memoir and Colleen Leung (2001) in her documentary mention seeing the same photographs found in their homes as those found in their relatives in China. Nevertheless, rare are the images that are identified.

For example, while preparing my piece for the *Shashin* volume (Thomson 2005), I reviewed the photographs from the collection in the Cumberland Museum and Archives. Photograph CMA 140-130 was of two unidentified young men: one standing, one seated. Only the number, 140, suggested that the image was one belonging to the Japanese community, but in CMA140-130, I "discovered" my uncle, Kelly (Kai Soon) Lim, as the seated individual. In a somewhat similar fashion, Shirley Chan wrote of an image, "Unidentified family, 1922," that was included in the *Gum San/Gold Mountain* catalogue (Vancouver Art Gallery 1985:42); it was the very same that hung on her mother's living room wall (2006:2).

These photographs provide the tangible evidence of lives lived. If only they could speak, what stories and experiences might be told to us the viewers. In some are seen families, while in others a lone man in working clothes looks out at us with his labours etched on his face and marked on his hands. The Chinese labourers who completed the CPR did not all find work in the cities, they went where opportunity allowed. This meant going to Cumberland, to Quesnel, to Lillooet, to Yale, and even to Alert Bay, not just to the big cities of Victoria and Vancouver. That work also meant being employed in other resource industries, that is, fishing, coal mining, and logging. In other cases, a small business was opened to support those who worked as labourers. Such was the case of my paternal grandfather in Cumberland; he went from coal mining to resume the traditional family occupation of making tofu. If I really thought

about it, a Chinatown in Alert Bay should not have been a surprise.

The history of Chinese Canadians was/is found in rural BC, not just in the urban areas, and those who were/are the keepers of this have tended to be the families for those fortunate enough to have had such; this fact also is a part of Chinese Canadian history and experience – of hardships due to racist legislation and attitudes, and of family separation due to restrictive immigration policies (see Yu 2006:75-76). As "behind-the-scene" personalities, their lives were primarily part of the community's oral history, not typically the mode accepted in establishing historical significance or relevance. How many people have read the *History of Alert Bay and District* (Healey 1958) to recognise the names Dong Chong or Jin King? Nonetheless, such people had a huge impact on the community. In the case of Dong Chong (Figure 2), he is one of the few identifiable individuals of Chinese ancestry whose name marks a geographic feature, unlike the multitude of place names with "China"-something, such as, China Butte or China Nose Mountain. In each case, the word China refers to the fact that early Chinese worked in the area (BC 2001a). The eponymous Dong Chong Bay refers to the booming ground of his Hanson Island logging operation (operated with two other partners) (BC 2001b).



Dong Chong (right) and sons, Bill and Jim, at the opening of Chong Supermarket, Alert Bay, BC, 1961. Photo courtesy of Chuck T. Wong.

Although not from rural BC, consider also Nellie Yip (a.k.a. Granny Yip or Nellie Yip Guong), 1882-1949, who was known for her linguistics skills, but even more so for her midwifery (Lim 2005). Acknowledged within the Vancouver Chinese community, she is mentioned in *The Concubine's Children* (Chong 1994:116-117), *The Jade Peony* (Choy 1995:96), and *Saltwater City* (See 1988:54-55). Outside the Chinese community, she "disappears" from any standard historical source.

Learning about the history of early Chinese in BC (or Canada) is not an easy task given the circumstances of written accounts (preservation, collection, etc.), nor is there a section in the school curriculum that requires it to be taught. Early Chinese pioneers, like other members of minority populations, are viewed as "footnotes" in BC history. For this reason, there are some who regard those of Chinese appearance as newly arrived, not realising that Chinese families also have made BC (and Canada) home since the late 1800s.

In recollecting Chinese Canadian history one is automatically faced with reflecting on the historic contribution of BC to Canada, BC's place in Canada's history, as well as the challenge of teaching BC history. My musings on this Alert Bay visit has brought me full circle: recognizing and acknowledging the early contributions of one group of British Columbians, Canadians, who also happened to be of Chinese ancestry.

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