
Sid Chow Tan

Aiyah!¹ A Little Rouse of Time and Space

(excerpt)

Even with testimonial witness and record, historians still make educated guesses to fill in the gaps. When there are no witnesses and records to history, one can only imagine. Yet with imagination, the divination of grand meaningful historical events is possible, and the minutia within. So it is with “A Little Hoy Ping on the Prairies” and “Gim and Ruby,” stories of the meeting between my Grandfather and Indigenous people in what would be his final resting place on the great plains of North America.

What follows are two tellings of the story of a seminal moment for our family. The narrative account is my response to a call for submissions for a Chinese Canadian National Council online history and culture project five years ago. The dialogic account is my ongoing personal effort, manifesting partly in Gold Mountain Turtle Island, a collaborative First Nations and Chinese opera in development by the Carnegie Community Centre in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, British Columbia. Both efforts are rooted in my belief that

First Nations and the Chinese in Canada must look to the future for a fair telling of their history.

There are many people to thank for their encouragement: my children and their children, their partners, the mother of my children and our grandchildren, my friends and frequent critics Anne-Marie Sleeman, Leah Kaser, Jim Wong-Chu, Victor Wong, Sean Gunn, and Elwin Xie. Special thanks to Rika Uto and Ethel Whitty of the Carnegie Community Centre, Donna Spencer of the Firehall Arts Centre, and collaborators Renae Morriseau, Michelle La Flamme, and Shon Wong of the First Nations/Chinese Opera project. For my Grandparents, Chow Gim (Norman) Tan and Wong Nooy Tan. May their sleep soothe.

1) A Little Hoy Ping² on the Prairies

Ah Yeh (paternal grandfather) had good luck. His survival in Canada came with the close friendships formed with the local Cree and Métis clans of the great plains of Gum San (Gold Mountain/North America). To these Aboriginal and Native brothers and sisters, our family thanks you.

Ah Yeh's early life in Canada was loneliness and hard work. He silently cursed the racist exclusion law (1923–1947)³ that separated him from his new wife and recently born son. It would be a quarter of a century before he could be reunited with his wife here in Canada. Then they would wait nearly another quarter of a century before their only child and his family could join them.

Mercifully, opening and running a café supplanted the loneliness. He often thought of the money he borrowed for the head tax and starting his café. Then would silently curse again the racist law that required only Chinese people to pay a tax to come to Canada. He always wondered why he and all other Chinese were required to pay a tax that was enough to buy two houses. Europeans got free land to farm. He knew the obvious answer. Oh well, he thought, at least the government allowed him to hire Indian women to help waitress and wash dishes. A law forbade him and other Chinese business owners from hiring white women.

Every day, Ah Yeh hoped for enough business so there was money to send back to and support his family in China. The two-elevator Saskatchewan town Ah Yeh had opened shop in had an Indian Agency. This manifest of the so-called ‘white man’s burden’ doled out ammunition, snare wire, and food vouchers for Indians living on reservations. Most of the Indian reservations were within a day’s walking distance to the Post Office where the Agency was located.

A childhood playmate lived in a suite on the third floor of the town’s federal and largest building because his parents did the cleaning and fixing. The boast of the town is the second oldest continuous operating courthouse in Canada built next to the historic provincial Land Titles office. Two blocks away, upstairs in the Town Hall, was reputedly the grandest opera house on the Canadian prairies when built.

Another childhood playmate lived south of us, across a vacant lot with his ‘in-town’ relatives. Ah Yeh eventually bought and renovated the solidly built house and also built a house on the vacant lot. My friend was a local Cree band chief’s son, and we would often walk to school together in those carefree days of life. Our facial features and hair were similar and our friendship playful. This welcomed a little Hoy Ping in the territory of the mighty Cree Nation of Saskatchewan near Sweetgrass and Red Pheasant.

Ah Yeh often swapped cash for the food vouchers the Indians received. Over the years, his café slowly became both a retail store and a small wholesale food outlet to the nudge–nudge wink–wink of special redemption-for-voucher locals. During the winter, his garage behind the store was often an overnight stop for those too drunk or tired to make the long trip home to the reservation. Many hunters, Indian and whites, would bring seemingly waste parts of bears, deer, moose, and other wild animals in exchange for food and cash. Ah Yeh would dry and prepare the parts, selling them for medicinal purposes to the knowing.

Fast forward 50 years later ...

When I was naughty or didn’t study Chinese, Ah Yeh would call me a *mong gok doy* (lost kingdom boy), meaning the loss of country and culture. In reality, he was referring to Aboriginal people, defeated by the superior firepower, Europeans who stole their land and then tried to erase their language and culture. It was Ah Yeh’s rule that my adopted

brother and I had to speak Chinese in the back of the store where we ate and slept. The penalty for not speaking Chinese? A knuckle duster ring on the skull. Ouch! Ah Nging (paternal grandmother), who carried me to Canada as a baby ‘paper son’—illegally—in 1950, also called me a *mong gok doy* along with expletives and endearments. Her penalty for not speaking Chinese? The ear grab. Ouch!

Ah Yeh often used the story of how young Indians lost their language and culture to try to convince my brother and me of what would befall us if we did not have Chinese reading and writing skills. My answer to his preachings? Then as now, never having been the sharpest knife in the drawer, I rebelled against his old-fashioned ideas—comics, rock and roll, and later a clandestine firecracker, condoms, and cigarettes franchise among my friends. One thing led to another—girls, cars, university, et cetera. Some Hoy Ping language survives with me though, thanks to Ah Yeh’s knuckle dusting and Ah Nging’s ear grabs. Ah Yeh gave Chinese names to my children, the first of our family line to be born in the Gold Mountain after a century and a half of struggle. Sadly, my grandparents did not live to see my first grandchild—the fifth generation of our Tan branch of the Chow family tree to be living in Canada.

Ah Yeh showed wisdom but was aloof, my being Ah Nging’s baby Buddha. As a boy, a child really, Grandfather at age ten was already imbued with the spirit of the Kwan Kung—righteousness, devotion, and loyalty—when he offered to look after a rich man’s cows so his older sister would not be

sold. Whenever Ah Nging told this story, she would cry. Her husband was a man who jumped at the chance to *dow jee foo*—go to land of perpetual toil—at age nineteen. Without any classroom schooling, Ah Yeh eventually taught himself to read and write Chinese and a little bit of English too. Because he gave locals credit for food and goods, his story of times and spaces is memorable and prescient: simply, a Canada that excluded him for most of his life but within it, a people who welcomed him.

Ah Yeh explained we are the people of *jung gok*—the middle or centre kingdom. It is natural for an affinity to exist between middle and lost kingdoms, more so since both had suffered under *hun mor gok*—the kingdom of the red hairs. Now called *ying gok*, the ‘red hairs’ is in reference to British and white English speakers who evidently ate a lot of carrots. The Chinese ‘ying’ character here means ‘heroic and dashing.’ Hey, police then were known as *look yee*—green coats—because green was the uniform colour of immigration officials. Ah Yeh’s take on the British was to adopt the name Norman because they had defeated the Anglos.

There is no written record of when the middle and lost kingdom crossed paths in historic Battleford, Saskatchewan—at one time the site of the territorial government of most of what is now western Canada. Almighty Voice is a legend here. Louis Riel had spent time in the Fort Battleford jail, as did Cree leaders Chiefs Poundmaker and Big Bear. Wandering Spirit was among the six Cree and two Assiniboine men hung for

insurrection within the fort's stockade, the largest mass hanging in Canada since Confederation. Norman of the Hoy Ping clan of the middle kingdom, driven to this land by hunger, arrived to seek opportunity.

In my mind, Ah Yeh's seminal meeting with the Cree was simple, solemn, and about respect, consent, and trust. He would have introduced himself by saying he was pleased to meet the leaders of the Red Pheasant and Sweetgrass clan of the Cree people.

“Welcome to my café. My name is Norman and I am a cook. Together we can prosper so I can bring my wife and son to live among you. We have a common racist enemy so let us help each other. Like me, you do not have the vote so are treated as second class. We will talk more about this after you taste my cooking.”

“Your face and words tell us you are a brother. Your offer to feed us shows you are generous and respectful. I am Len, chief of the Red Pheasant. We welcome you as our brother,” says the apparent commander of the men of the Red Pheasant and Sweetgrass. He nods to those closest to the outside door, and two big tubfuls of fresh fish and game, a sack of potatoes, and a mix of vegetables are brought, deposited in the kitchen.

Norman turns the radio on and instructs the men to help themselves to coffee. Len and Norman go to the kitchen. Here Norman purposefully amazes the chief with his deftness and

flourishes with axe, meat cleaver, and knife in cutting and preparing the bounty. Len asks Norman if he'll teach him how to cut and chop like him. They both begin work on the feast of fusion—likely venison chop suey, roast wild duck with potatoes, fried and steamed fresh pickerel, and goldeye. Of course there would be rice and soy sauce.

Norman's cooking is clearly a hit with the Cree men, even though they tease Len that it is women's work. When most are done eating, three young Cree women arrive with more game and potatoes. They take away the leftover food, tasting and giggling all the while clearing the tables, washing the dishes, and cleaning the kitchen. Norman seems beguiled by one woman apparently in charge, and his new Cree brothers notice. She smiles, he smiles, everyone smiles. Later, Norman lets them all know he is the sole support for his extended family in China whom he misses very much. Slowly, everyone leaves except Len.

“My sister Ruby smiles at you because she needs a job. Her husband has run off,” Len says to Norman, who brings out a bottle of scotch and two glasses. Len shakes his head from side to side, lifting his coffee cup. “Whiskey poisons my people. I do not drink it. Ruby raises her son alone because her boy's father loves whiskey too much. Ruby is a good woman and does not drink whiskey anymore.”

“I understand,” acknowledges Norman, pouring Len another coffee and himself a three-finger drink and lighting a cigarette. “Whiskey is the small warmth at the end of a long work

day. Soothing if I do not drink more than a small glass or two. Your sister is a good worker. I need help with the weekend lunch and dinner trade and will treat her fairly.”

Norman ran his café and store for nearly fifty years, over twenty-five without Nooy, his wife and their son, Wing, because of Canada’s racist exclusion law against us Chinese. When asked about this, he looks towards the back wall shrine of Kwan Kung, patron protector of warriors, writers, and artists, facing the front door. Then he looks upward as towards heaven and thanks the local Indians and Métis for their friendship. Ah Nging coughs. Ah Yeh then gives a thumbs up and in a warrior’s voice proclaims, “*Lo wah kiu ho sai lai*”—old overseas Chinese number one.

Ah Nging chuckles saying, “Ho yeah, ho yeah”—good stuff, good stuff.

Grandfather and Grandmother, I will never forget you.

Notes

- ¹ *Aiyah* is an exclamation in Chinese. It is used as a sigh or “oh, oh” or “wow man.”
- ² “*Hoy Ping*” literally means “open peace” and is the name of a district in southern China. This story was first published as an online essay at the Asian Canadian Culture Online Project website: <http://www.ccnc.ca/accop/index.php?section=content/essays/essayMain.php&sub=content/essays/sidTan/sidTan.shtml>
- ³ See: *The Chinese Immigration Act* (1923). S.C., c. 38.

Biography

Born in China and a baby paper son (illegal) immigrant to Canada in 1950 following the repeal of Chinese exclusion, **Sid Chow Tan** is a descendant of pioneer adventurers. Raised in small-town Saskatchewan by grandparents, a graduate of the University of Calgary and nearly forty-year resident of Metro Vancouver, Sid has been active for nearly three decades in community media and redress for the Chinese head tax/exclusion laws. Growing up the youngest in the only Chinese family in town, Sid's politics is informed by a life of anti-racism and social justice activism, occasionally resulting in civil disobedience and arrest. His first recollection as an activist is a grade seven school debate supporting universal health care. Since then, he has helped found and build organizations in Vancouver and across Canada to fill community and personal needs. A freelance media producer and community organizer, Sid's current community service includes national chairman of the Chinese Canadian National Council and founding and current director of Head Tax Families Society of Canada, ACCESS Association of Chinese Canadians for Equality and Solidarity Society, National Anti-Racism Council of Canada, Downtown Eastside Community Arts Network, Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood Council, W2 Social Enterprise Café Society, CMES Community Media Education Society, and W2 Community Media Arts Society, soon to be operating a multi-purpose multi-platform media arts centre in the historic Woodward's building. Father to a son and daughter, his art is activism and his trade is in organizing.

Boys on the dock from the Spanish Indian Residential School
Courtesy of Father William Maurice, S.J. Collection – The Shingwauk
Project

