

A Long Journey of Migration

Nelson is not a familiar city in BC for me. When the Executive Director Astrid Heyerdahl and Curator Arin Fay asked me to make a show related to Nelson Chinese immigrants' history at the Touchstones Nelson Museum of Art and History last year, I realized Nelson is far to the south of Vancouver. Through my previous research on Chinese immigrant history in Canada, I went to many cities and small towns in BC, but I haven't yet explored the history of Chinese immigrants in Nelson and the Kootenays. It was new to me and I got excited.

This May, I went to Nelson for the first time. The city is surrounded by mountains and the Kootenay River. I felt a sense of familiarity because it was like my hometown of Chongqing in China, which is a mountain city surrounded by rivers. I liked Nelson immediately. I started to meet people like Fred Wah, Tim Jay, Kwala Smith, Clement Lam, Janson Xiao, Greg Nesteroff and many others who knew about Chinese history in Nelson. My friend and Nelson resident Stephen Metcalf drove me around the city looking for Chinese historical sites. I also spent time with archivist JP Stienne in the Touchstone Museum Archive, digging through old photos and newspapers for traces of Chinese immigrants in Nelson and Revelstoke. Cathy English, the director of the Revelstoke Museum also sent me many old photos and files about early Chinese immigrants in Revelstoke. All of the images and text came together in my mind and a vision of a long journey emerged in front of me.

The early Chinese came to Nelson, Revelstoke and the Kootenays as mining and railroad labourers starting from 1865. They were hard-workers but they got paid 50% less than white workers. They couldn't bring their families to Canada because of the Head Tax, the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923-1947. Some workers even committed suicide.

The first Chinatown was built on Vernon Street in 1892, and in 1898 it was ordered by the city to move to a lower area on Lake Street, so that the residents would be "comparatively isolated."

Later, the Chinese were only allowed to work in the restaurant and laundry businesses, or as house servants and laborers in gardens and vegetable farms. Generations of Chinese worked hard in those jobs and made a great contribution to the city of Nelson and its people. Businesses include Mar Sam laundry, Wo Lee Garden, Carlie Bing vegetable farm, The Diamond Grill, LD Cafe, New Star Cafe, and The KC Restaurant and the list goes on.

Chinese immigrants went to English school to learn the new language. They formed basketball teams and music groups. They joined the army during the Second World war to fight for their country. They formed their own business associations and other organizations to be able to integrate within their adopted society. Meanwhile, they opened Chinese language schools in order to maintain their cultural roots and form hybrid identities.

Starting from the bottom of society, working at low paying jobs as a labourer, I had similar experiences as the early Chinese immigrants. I landed in Vancouver 30 years ago. At the beginning I worked at a laundromat, car wash, pizza parlor, and I worked as a busboy at the cafeteria at the University of British Columbia. Then I finally found a job as a Technician, then a Sessional Instructor at several universities. I finally became a full professor at UBC. Throughout this long journey, I kept making my artwork at same time, to share my thoughts as an individual who crosses boundaries and passes through different cultural zones.

The inheritance and innovation of culture are achieved through the contributions of many generations. Cultural identity does not come out of idle talk. It comes from persistence and constant effort by an individual despite years of adversity. It is forged by the conflicts between cultures. It is forged by the struggles of a person's body and mind. It is not the extension of the original culture, nor a repetition of the unfamiliar new culture. It is what happens when a person is put in purgatory, but fights for release.

I am happy to see that a stone monument was erected at the corner of Hall and Vernon Street in Nelson, commemorating Nelson's Chinatown in 2011, and a road to Carlie Bing vegetable farm was named Bing Road. After over 100 years, society finally gave recognition and acknowledgement to Chinese immigrants and their contributions in Nelson.

A long journey of migration, a journey of cultural transformation, a journey of the unknown, a journey that remains...

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