

**RAILROAD PLAYS:  
PERFORMING RECONCILIATION IN ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN THEATRE**

by

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B.A., Simon Fraser University, 2002

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Theatre)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

April 2013

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## ***Abstract***

*Railroad Plays: Performing Reconciliation in Asian North American Theatre* is a study into a specific sub-genre of theatre coming out of the Asian Canadian and American demographic. I use the term "railroad plays" to describe a body of work that gives voice to immigrant experiences working on the railroad. In a nutshell, railroad plays allow us to revisit and better understand historical prejudices of the late 19th and early 20th century. Additionally "performing reconciliation" is a term I use to suggest how contemporary theatre can help minority groups to engage in social activism, by imagining new ways of looking at history while reconsidering intercultural relationships. I argue that playwrights employ a variety of dramatic techniques – storyline, language and symbols, characterization, genre, and references to historical events – in order to encourage readers and audiences to reconsider intercultural relationships in North America. In this thesis, I analyze the dramatic text of two railroad plays: *The Forbidden Phoenix* by Marty Chan, and *lady in the red dress* by David Yee. Both playwrights make references to historical moments and use the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway as a way to discuss broader issues such as human rights, inequality, and immigration. Additionally, I analyze a third railroad play by American playwright David Henry Hwang. I provide a literary analysis of the play text coupled with a performance review of a 1998 Vancouver production, paying close attention to physicality, intercultural elements and audience reception.

The purpose of my thesis is to draw meaningful connections between theatre practice and social justice, by asking: How do railroad plays contribute to a more nuanced knowledge and understanding of theatre history and intercultural relationships in Canada?

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## *Acknowledgements*

Professor Siyuan (Steven) Liu, my supervisor, for showing me how much integrity and passion academic work deserves, and for the opportunity to serve as a Graduate Academic and Research Assistant. I honor your wisdom and generosity.

Professor Kirsty Johnston, for her inspiring guidance and teaching. UBC is fortunate to have you on board. Thanks for your genuine interest, curious and empathetic listening ear.

Professor Jerry Wasserman, who made the time to sit down and encourage me to articulate my research to SSHRC, and for providing careful reading and feedback on my masters and doctoral proposals – much appreciated.

Sandra Chamberlain-Snider and Katrina Dunn, my MA cohort, for their companionship throughout.

To all of the writers, artists, and academics who champion Asian Canadian Arts, Culture and Theatre. Thank you for your courage and efforts to build a genuine and cosmopolitan vision for Canada.

I would like to acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, for providing me with a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship. Canadians are fortunate citizens to have public support of this kind.

Thanks to the staff, faculty and my fellow students in the Department of Theatre and Film for their creative energy, and for the Graduate Support Initiative. I am grateful and honored to be in your presence.

This thesis is dedicated to Patrick, Frances and Ryan Chang, who are always supportive of my ongoing, artistic and intellectual pursuits. This thesis is also dedicated to the memory of Maymee, my maternal grandmother, who passed away during the writing of my thesis – I will fondly remember the days of "parking cars" for you during the PNE.

To my entire family: I aspire to your humanity, courage and workmanship.

And to my partner and companion, Robert Kardosh, who is always there; no words can explain how lucky I am to have you in my life.

## ***Introduction***

The bitterest and longest parliamentary wrangle in the history of the young Canadian nation ended on February 15, 1881, when the contract to build the Canadian Pacific Railway finally received royal ascent .... The initials – CPR – had already entered the national lexicon .... In the decades to follow they would come to symbolize many things to many people -- repression, monopoly, daring, exploitation, imagination, government subsidy, high finance, patriotism, paternalism, and even life itself. There were few Canadians who were not in some manner affected by the presence of the CPR. (Berton 6)

Taken directly from Pierre Berton's popular history book, *The Last Spike: The Great Railway, 1881-1885*, this passage captures with great verve and accessibility the historic connection between Canada and the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). The quote also suggests just how important the CPR, as a national institution, became for the cultural imagination and unity of Canada. Perhaps more than any other government infrastructure of the 19th century, the CPR contributed to the settlement of the West and helped to unite the provinces that constituted the Dominion of Canada. Sponsored by the Canadian government and overseen by American pioneers, the project required literally thousands of men in order to be completed in a timely fashion. Consequently, immigrants from near and far were recruited for the majority of the backbreaking work that took place between 1881 and 1885. Thus, it could be said that Canadian history is inextricably tied to the lives and efforts of railroad workers, many of whom came from China and experienced extreme forms of discrimination.

It is widely known that thousands of Chinese migrants worked on the western leg of the railway, especially throughout British Columbia. I will argue that a nuanced explication of Canada history cannot negate or erase the stories of these immigrants. And yet, there has been a noticeable lack of public awareness, at least until recently, of the

immigrants' plight and the conditions that surrounded their existence in the late 19th century. The rich and storied history of European and Asian pioneers has contributed to the complex web of intercultural relationships in Canada. However, the history of the railroad is also tied to the harsh experiences of pioneers, many of whom were treated unfairly and discriminated against during and after the construction of the CPR. Indeed, this period of Canadian history is fraught with intercultural tension. We must recognize this moment in Canadian history.

Perhaps the most ironic fact is that Chinese people were hesitantly welcomed during the 1880s when labor was desperately needed in large numbers. But once the work had been completed, the same large group of migrants was simultaneously shunned and excluded from public affairs, creating a cultural schism that is explained in *Contesting Canadian Citizenship: Historical Readings*:

Completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885 and incorporation of Vancouver as a city in 1886 prefaced attempts to transform the entire province of British Columbia into a white settler society. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, strategies aimed at recruiting white Anglo immigrants were implemented. Concomitantly, repressive strategies for "othering" non-Anglo racial and ethnic groups were put in place, including denial of entry to British Columbia, expulsion from the province, and segregation/containment within the province. (Chunn 363)

This statement points specifically to the discrimination experienced by Chinese people living in British Columbia, alluding to various state-sanctioned policies ranging from the Chinese Exclusion Act to the Chinese Head Tax and the public smear campaign promoting "Yellow Peril." In my view, the construction of the railroad is a unique phenomenon and a contested symbol that represents both national expansion and cultural exclusion. In addition to popular books, such as *The Last Spike*, there are numerous publications that document the creation of the railroad and the exploits of the many

people involved in the affairs of the CPR. Similarly, in the theatre community, the railroad continues to fascinate playwrights interested in representing the complex history of Chinese settlement and immigration in North America.

In this thesis, I draw attention to a sub-genre of Canadian and American playwriting that deals directly with the experiences of railroad workers. Specifically, I have found a number of plays that use the railroad as a metaphor. For Canadian and American playwrights of Asian descent, dramatic texts provide the terrain on which stakes are claimed, bringing the voices of lesser known characters into the public imaginary. Rather than reiterating dominant narratives or myths that represent immigrants as helpless, uneducated or downtrodden, the railroad plays I examine showcase characters who are self-assured, thoughtful and full of agency.

Railroad plays engage in a kind of social activism. In these works, playwrights employ a number of literary and dramatic techniques in order to achieve their desired effects, including narrative, symbols, language, characterization, and references to historical moments in order to provide new perspectives on intercultural conflict.

The first chapter lays the academic foundation for the entire thesis. I begin with a literary review of books and articles pertaining to Asian Canadian theatre writ large. My intention in this chapter is to engage with recurring issues and debates in the field. The review starts with Xiaoping Li's book, *Voices Rising: Asian Canadian Cultural Activism* (2007) and *Asian Canadian Theatre: New Essays on Canadian Theatre, Volume One* (2011), edited by Ric Knowles and Nina Lee Aquino. Later I integrate ideas from *China-town Theatre as Transnational Business* by Wing Chung Ng. Together, these sources prove useful in understanding Asian Canadian theatre as both artistic practice and social

activism.

In the second chapter, I look at dramatic texts in comparison. I have chosen *The Forbidden Phoenix* by Marty Chan and *lady in the red dress* by David Yee as two representative examples of railroad plays. Both plays were published in 2010 by Playwrights Canada Press; they are quite different in tone, and illustrate the fact that railroad plays are by no means homogenous. The comparative analysis will focus on textual elements in the plays, rather than their live productions. By comparing the various literary elements such as narrative, characterization, symbols, language and references to historical moments, I assess how playwrights employ dramatic techniques in order to engage in social critique and activism. It is also worth mentioning that playwrights of railroad plays focus on the conditions of Chinese immigrants in North America, often exposing the harsh discrimination faced by these men. In some cases, railroad plays do not necessarily feature characters working on the railroad. Instead, playwrights are often suggestive and subtle in how they address various problems associated with the construction of the transnational railroad. For example, David Yee's *lady in the red dress* features Tommy Jade, a character who must pay the Head Tax so that he may be reunited with his wife. While the occupation of Jade is not explicitly known, the timeline and his presence during a 1923 flashback suggest that he may have worked on the railroad. In this instance, the absence of a railroad motif serves as a provocation, encouraging readers to "connect the dots" and give the Tommy Jade character a back story.

To various degrees, railroad plays attempt to reconcile the complicated relationship between seemingly discreet, but interconnected elements: the construction of the railroad, the Chinese Head Tax and Chinese Exclusion Act, and the fight towards

redress in Canada and the United States. In reality, each of these elements must be considered in relation to the construction of the railroad as an impetus for change. In all cases, I am interested in examining how playwrights of railroad plays wrestle with issues such as social injustice, human rights, and intercultural relationships in a global world.

Chapter three sets out to analyze a third railroad play using a different approach. Here I consider a 1998 Vancouver production of David Henry Hwang's *The Dance and the Railroad*, a production I had the good fortune to have been involved with as one of two principal actors. Using the original video footage from the 1998 production as a reference, I provide a performance review of the work, looking at dramatic techniques and commenting upon production values, directorial vision and audience reception.

In my conclusion, I provide a summary of the three railroad plays examined in chapters two and three, teasing out similarities, differences and recurring elements. I reconfirm that railroad plays are a sub-genre of Asian Canadian and American theatre and reiterate the fact that they speak to both culturally specific and national concerns. It is my firm belief that by analyzing railroad plays, we can begin to understand history as a socially constructed phenomenon. Far from being mere static moments of the past, our socially constructed history is a set of constantly evolving artifacts of the collective imaginary. I conclude with thoughts on how railroad plays contribute to North American history and socially-engaged theatre practice.

## *Chapter One: Theorizing Asian Canadian Culture*

In the 21st century, the burgeoning field known as Asian Canadian theatre has been drawing increasing attention from scholars. In May of 2009, GENesis: Asian-Canadian Theatre Conference and the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Potluck Festival, hosted by fu-GEN in Toronto, took place in tandem with each other. Both of these events showcased the breadth of theatre practice and scholarship in this field. *Asian Canadian Theatre, New Essays on Canadian Theatre*, a book edited by Nina Lee Aquino and Ric Knowles, arose out of the conference and documented the various papers and panel discussions that took place over the week-long event.

Asian Canadian theatre is part of a larger movement that engages social activism through non-fiction, novels, poetry, fiction, academia, policy-making, and playwriting in order to create a platform for this historically marginalized group. To examine the first-hand experiences of Canadians of Asian descent is a necessary task in framing the work of theatre artists and playwrights. Written by Xiaoping Li, the book *Voices Rising: Asian Canadian Cultural Activism* traces three decades of activity which crosses a variety of disciplines and artistic practices. As described in her introduction:

The living embodiment of Asian Canadian cultural activism comprises a community consisting of scholars, university students, self-made or professionally trained artists, and community activists... many, particularly those who launched the movement in the 1970s, consciously undertake a role similar to that which Gramsci ascribed to “organic intellectuals”.... The makers of this politically charged and socially committed cultural discourse see a close connection between intellectual, artistic activities and community/society betterment. (Li 2)

The description above and Li's reference to Gramsci's "organic intellectuals" provides a way to cross and collapse the strict and sometimes arbitrary divisions between artistic

disciplines – whether dance, theatre, music, or writing – with social activism and politically engaged work. Instead of a discipline-specific approach, the author focuses on the whole range of activities that take place within, or on behalf of, the Asian Canadian demographic. Li suggests that the term "Asian Canadian," much like the term "Asian American," is socially constructed. And while there is a real movement and noticeable coalition-building in the community, not all people may fully understand or self-define using the term.

The broad acceptance of the term "Asian Canadian" and other identity categories signifies a semantic shift in the symbolic order of Canadian nation. Nonetheless, the deeper meanings of these names are likely to be comprehended only by those who decide to subscribe to them. It is likely that these names do not hold any special meanings for newly arrived immigrants, who have yet to negotiate a new identity through the acquisition of historic knowledge and civic participation. (25)

Clearly, there are sufficient examples of people, living and deceased, that can be referenced when speaking about community-based or cultural activism. Xiaoping Li captures in her book-length study what few others have previously done. First, she attempts to theorize a range of cultural activity under one umbrella. Second, she provides a space for artists and activists to speak directly about their experiences. The latter is achieved through a select number of in-depth interviews. Looking through the book, I see the names of younger practitioners (some of whom I have worked with) as well as the names of senior artists who continue to pave the way for the current generation.

Cultural identity in Canada is a site of differing opinions, one full of debates revolving around issues such as minority language rights, multiculturalism, immigration, cultural heritage and nation-state. For this reason, I am grateful for the manner in which Xiaoping Li traces the roots of Asian Canadian social activism. She notes:

It is important to understand that Asian Canadian cultural production developed

not only into social movements and revolutions outside the national boundaries but also in relation to political struggles that are specifically Canadian; namely, Quebecois nationalism, regionalism, First Nations struggles against colonial legacies, and English Canadian nationalist struggles against the dominant colonial forces of Anglo-European and American cultures. (12)

This broader framing device reveals the connection between Asian Canadian interests and a broader set that are national in scope, drawing attention to the cultural spheres that are constantly being negotiated in the 21st century. At this time, I will reiterate the importance of studying Asian Canadian playmaking, for it provides a voice to artists who reference diverse elements from Asia and Canada. These stories are for a global audience; they arise out of intercultural exchanges that should have relevance for a cosmopolitan country such as Canada. Asian Canadian theatre is an outlet for members of a community who wish to share their experiences with a broad public, and in the process, foster a more nuanced and multi-faceted national history.

In many ways, railroad plays provide a platform from which Canadians of Chinese descent can begin to understand how their social status and political identities have been shaped by history. This brings us to the moment in history when thousands of Chinese migrants came to Canada to help build the transnational railroad. Soon after arriving in Canada, these pioneers experienced a great deal of prejudice:

Historically, although Asian Canadian pioneers were not colonized as were First Nations peoples, their labour was exploited to assist in the formation of the Canadian nation-state, and they were subject to the racializing process accompanying nation building. The new European order, which was based on a hierarchy of race and culture, was maintained not only through bureaucratic practices (e.g., population enumeration), legal manoeuvres (e.g., immigration laws, enfranchisements, naturalization, and citizenship), and economic exploitation, but also through representing the European's "other" in official, mass media, and popular cultural discourses. (Li 13)

In this quote, Li refers to various state-sanctioned policies that discouraged Chinese

immigration into Canada. Not long after thousands of Chinese immigrants were allowed into the country in order to complete the Canadian Pacific Railway, discriminatory practices such as the Head Tax and Chinese Exclusion Act emerged, marking a tense and dark moment<sup>1</sup> in the history of Canada. During this time, a growing discontent within the Asian community, exacerbated specifically by ongoing prejudices and stark racism, resulted in collaborative efforts between Canadians of Asian descent and those from other cultural backgrounds. In her article, “Beyond Being Others: Chinese Canadians as National History,” Lisa Rose Mar writes:

Canada’s imposition of anti-Chinese immigration laws between 1885 and 1947 incited universal opposition among Chinese Canadians. From their ancestral villages in Guangdong’s countryside to North America’s corridors of power, Chinese organized resistance to their exclusion. They mobilized resources in Canada, China, Hong Kong, and the United States, creating political influence by drawing together all the linkages between their Pacific world and Canada. (19)

Deliberate resistance and social activism is commonly practiced by groups who feel either disenfranchised, discriminated against, or pushed to the margins by others. It is interesting to note that cultural activism, as defined by Xiaoping Li, can manifest itself on socio-political levels as well as intellectual and artistic levels. In fact, by the mid-twentieth century changes were beginning to take place. Mar explains: “By the mid-1940s, many British Columbians saw sojourners and illegal immigrants as deserving parts of the national polity. They regarded them as members of their communities, suggesting a more multicultural and global-local Canadian history than scholars have presumed” (33).

The innate desire of people to tell their stories and connect in meaningful ways to

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<sup>1</sup> The Head Tax and Chinese Exclusion Act created and/or exacerbated existing tension between cultural groups. This period is a "dark moment" in Canadian history, often referred to as "Humiliation Day" by members of the Asian Canadian community. The Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted on July 1, 1923, ironically coinciding with Dominion Day, or what is now known as Canada Day.

the world around them cannot be underestimated. It is for this reason that I have chosen theatre as a medium to study, for it is arguably the most social of all the art forms: not only for the way in which it is created in groups, but also the way in which the medium manifests itself in the public domain. While other disciplines such as dance, music and film also bring people together, theatre remains the only form that can place real bodies in situations that emulate real-life events. Arguably, theatre can bring historical moments into the present by enacting such events onstage, and by emulating the way that real people once lived and acted. Railroad plays are important sites for the study of Asian Canadian culture simply because they reflect back upon the realities of early pioneers, many whom laid the foundation for the nation's growth and prosperity.

Now we turn our attention more specifically towards Asian Canadian theatre and the many discourses that surround its recent blossoming. Asian Canadian theatre is a growing phenomenon, part of a larger cultural movement that parallels a similar yet more established tradition of Asian American theatre south of the border.<sup>2</sup> As *Asian Canadian Theatre, New Essays on Canadian Theatre*, edited by Nina Lee Aquino and Ric Knowles, reminds us, the field is by no means defined by one theory or narrative. Despite its diverse and heterogeneous character, some notable arguments and useful generalizations have been made by scholars interested in the field.

In his article, "Asian Canadian Performance and the Politics of Misrecognition," Christopher Lee acknowledges that the widespread celebration of such developments as

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<sup>2</sup> Compared to "Asian Canadian" theatre in Canada, "Asian American" theatre has a longer history in the United States. The activity down south has been captured in various books: *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian-American Plays*, ed. Misha Berson (Theatre Communications Group, 1990); *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* by Dorinne Kondo (Routledge, 1997); *A History of Asian American Theatre* by Esther Kim Lee (Cambridge University Press, 2006), and *Contemporary Asian American Plays, Version 3.0*, ed. Chay Yew (Theatre Communications Group 2011) to name a few.

the "first book" or the "first conference" on Asian Canadian theatre can be slightly misleading. He writes: "While these achievements are often worth recognizing and celebrating, it also seems necessary to interrogate the assumptions that authorize our ubiquitous focus on inaugurations, watersheds, and breakthroughs.... They profoundly shape the temporality of its political imagination" (103). I believe this word of caution is warranted. Watershed moments in the 21st century often suggest a kind of progress, but can inadvertently negate the work of pioneers that have come before us. The suggestion that Asian Canadian theatre is a brand new field is somewhat inaccurate at best, for it tends to downplay or ignore the fact that Canadians of Asian descent have long been producing theatre and presenting themselves onstage, even shortly after arriving in Canada. Just as the history of European-inspired theatre in Canada has shown, early Chinese Canadian theatre performers and audiences often engaged in theatre that was culturally familiar to them. This often involved hosting opera troupes, which brought with them the stories from the homeland. As documented in *Chinatown Theatre as Transnational Business*:

As a result of continuous immigration, the Chinese population in the Saltwater City grew to about 3,500 in 1911 and then to 6,500 ten years later. The prospects for the theatre business improved accordingly. By 1915 there were reportedly two theatre houses operating in Vancouver's Chinatown; namely Ko Sing on East Pender Street and Sing Ping around the corner on Columbia Street. These theatres were catering to an expanding audience. (Ng 31)

The type of theatre performed in these Chinatown venues parallels the kind of entertainment that was seen in the vaudeville houses, not that they were similar in content or form, but inasmuch as they were also imported shows that were made possible through international touring circuits. Ng goes on to suggest that Cantonese opera troupes from southern China provided the entertainment for a growing immigrant population on the

West Coast. This is not surprising given that the majority of people who came to work on the railroad were themselves Cantonese-speakers from the area of Guangzhou, situated in the southeast of China. Ng writes:

Chinatown theatre of the exclusion era was not a marginal institution, despite its long neglect by scholars. New evidence from Vancouver's Chinatown demonstrates that highly successful and wealthy merchants were involved in the business of providing affordable entertainment to their own people ... transnational theatre of Chinatown reached its high tide during the 1920s, when opera troupes and individual actors circulated widely and routinely to perform for their countrypeople in various locales. (53)

Given Canada's large Asian-born population, it is no surprise that theatre in Canada would eventually be influenced by this demographic. Over one hundred and thirty years after settling into Canada, citizens of Chinese descent can now claim to be integrated members of civic society. Having trained in western theatre schools, artists of Asian descent are now taking on roles as playwrights, actors, directors and producers. In essence, they are creating theatre that is meaningful and relevant to their own lives. Members of this demographic can now envision – albeit at a distance – the experiences of their ancestors and predecessors with fresh and critical eyes. As a socially-engaged, embodied, and sometimes, politically charged medium, theatre can often forge communities of interest that transcend national and geographic borders.

In response to the question "Is there an Asian Canadian theatre in Vancouver?"<sup>3</sup>

Adrienne Wong writes:

Our city's theatre scene is defined more along lines of practice than cultural background. The drawbacks: we lose young artists to film and television where they unlearn their stagecraft. This also perpetuates a cycle of exclusion and under-representation on Vancouver stages. At the same time, a practice-based ecology has one major benefit: intercultural collaboration within the companies themselves. (31)

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<sup>3</sup> I participated on the Artist Panel: Vancouver: On The Edge? facilitated by Adrienne Wong, including panelists Joyce Lam, Tricia Collins, C.E. (Chris) Gatchalian, Ella Chan, and Eury Chang.

The absence of a critical mass of professional companies actively supporting actors of Asian descent has forced theatre artists to become entrepreneurial and flexible. Asian Canadian theatre artists have become multi-faceted, taking on varied positions within and outside of the theatre community. Veteran actress Jean Yoon recently shared her critical views about the failure of national service organizations in serving culturally diverse artists. She writes, “Neither PACT [Professional Association of Canadian Theatres] nor CAEA [Canadian Actors' Equity Association] can be effective if they are unable to reach the growing culturally diverse theatre sector; they cannot be counted on to foster our theatre ecology and advance the living standards of culturally diverse artists doing the work” (82).

Another artist, Donald Woo – who studied playwriting at the National Theatre School in Montreal – describes his views on negotiating the cultural politics of Quebec. He writes, “Because not only was I part Asian in a French Canadian setting, I went to English school and identified myself more as “English” than “French” despite my fluency in both languages and my French ancestry. I was not the “other” for being ethnically different, but for my linguistic alignment” (100). For Woo, identity is defined not so much by one's cultural heritage as it is by the use of language.

Carrying these ideas forward, I will now direct my attention towards three railroad plays. Each of these plays showcases the depth of thought and stylistic range of Asian Canadian playmaking. While not all Asian Canadian playwrights deal with the railroad, the fact that it is a recurring motif in contemporary plays deserves some investigation. Despite being different in genre and in their treatment of content, the following railroad plays share some undeniably common traits. In trying to reconcile a

history of exclusion and prejudice, railroad plays seek to imagine new outcomes, new possibilities and new ways of talking about social injustices directed against Chinese pioneers. They achieve these goals while provoking audiences to reconsider the importance of healthy intercultural relationships in Canada.

## ***Chapter Two: Comparing Textual Elements in Railroad Plays***

In this chapter I compare two Canadian railroad plays written in recent years by Canadians of Asian descent. In doing so, I hope to illuminate a sub-genre of contemporary playmaking that refers to past social injustices – in particular, towards railroad workers, all men – during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In many ways, railroad plays seek to recover truths that are rarely acknowledged due to race-based discrimination and the tendencies of larger, more prestigious national narratives to be promoted widely to the general public. I have developed the term "railroad plays" to describe a sub-genre of Asian Canadian theatre that uses the construction of the railroad as a theme or starting place in which to situate historical moments fraught with tension, violence and human conflict.

I argue that a protagonist's journey can transcend cultural boundaries, making historic characters relevant to diverse contemporary audiences. I examine *The Forbidden Phoenix* by Marty Chan and *lady in the red dress* by David Yee, with a focus on the rhetorical and dramatic techniques employed by both playwrights. In both plays, the protagonist is placed firmly at the centre of a human struggle. As each story unfolds, the principal character must endure cultural conflict and overcome barriers in order to achieve some kind of peace or resolution. Beginning with a brief plot summary of each play, I then move into a comparative framework of analysis, identifying in each work the specific use of storyline and narrative, language and symbols, stylistic features and genre, characters and relationships, and references to moments of historical injustice. The remainder of the chapter engages in a comparative literary analysis of the dramatic text.

## Comparing Storyline

*The Forbidden Phoenix* is a play written by Marty Chan, with lyrics and music by Robert Walsh. Originally produced by the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton in 2008, the show was remounted at the Gateway Theatre in Richmond in 2011. Collaboratively written by a playwright and musician, the play is youth-friendly and appropriate to all ages. The protagonist is based on a Chinese simian with supernatural powers, who opens the play with a self-introduction: "I am Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, and this is my story" (Chan 3). The presence of the Monkey King character, drawn from the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, points to the targeted Asian demographic, and yet the play's careful mixture of musical styles from both "eastern" and "western" traditions suggests the cross-over appeal for a broad-based Canadian audience.

In *Journey to the West*, the folkloric hero Sun Wukong travels alongside his master, a monk, and the pilgrimage in the original novel is clearly a group endeavor. When Chan revisits the story, he takes great liberty in transplanting this mythic character into an altogether new context. Instead of traveling as part of a group, the protagonist Sun Wukong migrates alone, paralleling the journey of Chinese men who often came to Canada alone, without friends or family, to create a new and better life. This character seems an ideal figure to use in a contemporary play, for he not only undertakes the hero's journey but also represents someone who migrates and assimilates to a new country. In his article, "Western Journeys of Journey to the West," Carlos Rojas writes:

Monkey is ironically appropriate in this regard, insofar as *Journey to the West* is itself explicitly concerned with the possibility of transcultural travel and translation... [T]he figure of Monkey has consistently occupied a paradoxical status of representing, on the one hand, a quintessential icon of mutability and, on the other hand, a paradigm of cultural continuity. In fact, it is precisely the very consistency of his trademark rebelliousness and incorrigibility that ultimately

makes Monkey so familiar and beloved to Chinese readers. (334)

It is important to note that the “West” in the original novel, *Journey to the West*, does not refer to Western Canada or North America or even Europe. Rather, the “West” in the original novel refers to India, where the Buddhist scriptures were to be found; therefore, the title refers to Sun Wukong's journey from “East” (China) to “West” (India). By updating these references and placing them in a familiar Canadian context, Chan creates a drama that is relevant for contemporary audiences of all ages and cultural backgrounds.

Even before the dialogue begins, Chan uses the first page as a dedication: “To the Chinese immigrants who helped build Canada’s railroad” (Chan). The historical reference is clear. It is no secret that Canadians of Chinese descent, alongside European immigrants, contributed greatly to the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. However, it could be argued that fewer people know of the persistent and often extreme racial prejudice that Chinese in Canada experienced before and after the turn of the twentieth century.

*The Forbidden Phoenix*, in many ways, attempts to reconcile such injustices by translating a culturally-specific novel, originally set in China and India, into a story about a Chinese traveller in British Columbia. The escapades of the original novel's principal characters are outlined in *The Monkey & The Monk*, an abridgment of the extended novel by renowned scholar Anthony C. Yu, who writes:

The importance assigned to Xuanzang's<sup>4</sup> chief disciple may be seen in the fact that fully seven chapters at the beginning are devoted to relating Sun Wukong's

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<sup>4</sup> Xuanzang was a Buddhist monk and scholar who travelled throughout Central and South Asia in search of scriptures. His travels were documented in *The Great Tang Records of the Western Regions*, which inspired Wu Cheng'en to compose the novel, *Journey to the West*.

birth and development, his training and attainment in esoteric Daoist self-cultivation, his daring exploits throughout Heaven and Hell that climax in his wreaking horrific havoc at the Celestial Palace ... the monkey's restless intelligence, martial and magical prowess, and almost boundless resourcefulness have reminded many a modern Chinese and foreign reader of another simian hero across cultures: Hanumat<sup>5</sup> of the great Indian epic Ramayana. (Yu xi)

The issue of translation in dramatic text can provide both challenges and opportunities. Placing a figure from Chinese mythology into a contemporary play gives it an additional layer of meaning, at least for those who know the story. Those unaware of the origins of Monkey King, however, may lose the cultural nuance and details from the original story; to such readers and viewers, the Monkey King in the play may be seen simply as an anthropomorphic character within a Canadian context. In her book *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon describes these two levels of reception:

If we do not know that what we are experiencing actually is an adaptation and if we are not familiar with the particular work that it adapts, we simply experience the adaptation as we would any other work. To experience it as an adaptation, however, as we have seen, we need to recognize it as such and to know its adapted text, thus allowing the latter to oscillate in our memories with what we are experiencing. In the process we inevitably fill in any gaps in the adaptation with information from the adapted text. (120-1)

In other words, *The Forbidden Phoenix* is written in a manner that can be accessed by a number of demographics: Asian immigrants, Canadians of Asian and European descent, and those familiar or not with the original novel. As such, it is an intercultural play with the potential to reach and appeal to diverse audiences.

The play's protagonist, Sun Wukong (Monkey King), embarks on a traditional hero's journey, encountering numerous enemies, antagonists and challenges along the way, including battles with over-protective guards, soldiers, Empress Dowager, and

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<sup>5</sup> Hanumat or Hanuman is a Hindu deity, represented as a monkey man. He is Indian equivalent to the Chinese simian Sun Wukong, as both have superpowers. Hanuman is a devotee of Rama, the Supreme Being, and is featured in the Indian epic *Ramayana*.

Horne, a self-serving western engineer who seeks to break Forbidden Mountain for his own benefit. Clearly, Horne represents greed, unbridled capitalism and the consequences of growth and expansion. The naming of the Horne character is significant, for it is clearly meant to recall the name of William Van Horne, the American who served as president of the Canadian Pacific Railway during its construction.

As the journey progresses, Sun Wukong teams up with Phoenix, mother of Chun, a bird captured in Forbidden Mountain. While at first they are pitted against each other, both realize soon enough that they share some common ground. Phoenix empathizes with Sun Wukong as the latter shares stories of his son, Laosan, who serves as his primary motive: "He's a smile on legs. A ray of sunshine with cauliflower ears. His eyes remind me of how his mother used to look at me. When I promised Laosan I'd make a better life for him and our people, he gave me the same look my wife did. Such pride and faith. In her eyes, anything was possible" (Chan 29).

In response, Phoenix shares a similar story of her daughter, whom she thinks is lost forever. "My daughter, Chun, wanted to spread her wings and fly. She wanted to show me she could take care of herself, but I wouldn't let her go.... When I left the nest to find her food, Chun tried to fly on her own. I searched for days, but I couldn't find her" (Chan 29). While the play's overarching narrative deals with the hardships of Chinese laborers, the story also speaks to the sacrifices that families make for their offspring and future generations.

In the end, as with many folk tales and fairytales, good prevails over evil, which suggests the play's moral stance. Sun Wukong overcomes Horne and Iron Dragon (released from Forbidden Mountain) as well as Empress Dowager. As the play closes,

Sun Wukong reunites with Laosan, who represents the future generation. While the ending of the play is uplifting, it also provides a somewhat inaccurate depiction of the fate of most Chinese laborers in Canada, who either died on the railroad or were never reunited with their wives. Instead, Chan suggests that Laosan's mother has passed away before Sun Wukong goes to Terminal City. In doing so, the playwright strengthens the father-son bond for his audience and gives reason for him to return home. By reuniting family members, the playwright provides a sense of closure for his readers and audiences, leaving them with a sense of hope rather than despair. However, I remain skeptical of this positive ending. I wonder how it can help audiences grapple with the real-life stories and hardships of people who worked on the actual railroad, many of whom were less fortunate than the protagonist in the play.

David Yee's *lady in the red dress* strives to enact the cultural activism that is described by Xiaoping Li, and that seems ever-present in railroad plays. While *The Forbidden Phoenix* takes an allegorical approach to storytelling, Yee's play swings the pendulum to the opposite end of the theatrical spectrum. As a surreal, film-noir-inspired play with flashbacks, this play tackles the various social injustices experienced by Chinese Canadians with a frank voice and fierce approach to characterization. The play is full of innuendo, profanity and violence, and is likely to appeal to an older, more educated audience that is familiar with issues such as redress in Canada.

*lady in the red dress* does not feature any character working directly on the railroad, nor is the railroad mentioned anywhere in dialogue. Rather, the playwright situates his characters in various time periods (1923, 1943, and 2006) after the first wave of immigrants came to work on the Canadian Pacific Railway. Notwithstanding the

absence of the railroad as a thematic feature, educated readers are likely to make the connections between the original wave of Chinese immigrants who came to Canada during the 1880s and the subsequent Chinese Head Tax and the Chinese Immigration Act (also known as Chinese Exclusion Act). It is no stretch to suggest that the influx of immigrants working on the CPR exacerbated insecurities and racial prejudices, becoming the impetus for state-sanctioned policies aimed at preventing Chinese from entering the country shortly afterwards. Yee pens a compelling dedication in the published play text that recalls the dedication found in the first pages of *The Forbidden Phoenix*: "This play is dedicated to the 81,000 Chinese who paid the Head Tax, to the countless number who were kept from their families and loved ones during the Exclusion, to those who died building the foundation of this country only to be disavowed and forgotten" (Yee). Following this dedication, Yee writes a preface describing the series of events that inspired his play: "*lady in the red dress* began as a response to an email I received from an MP in British Columbia. The email itself was in reply to a petition I had signed in opposition to Bill C333" (Yee vii).

Bill C333 was a private member's bill, discussed during the 38th Parliament, 1st Session. The bill was contentious because numerous voices were at the table. It proposed a series of measures designed to redress historical injustices experienced by members of the Chinese Canadian community. The debates were complex and revolved around the merits of individual repayment versus group repayment, the lack of consensus between representatives in the government and those in the Chinese Canadian population, and the value of "apology" versus "acknowledgement." These debates resulted in a lengthy 49-page Act to recognize the discrimination against Chinese from 1880 and beyond. Yee

goes on to explain his relationship to the government at the time:

In 2006 I was subcontracted by the Canadian government to design the media presentation that would play before Harper's parliamentary apology was broadcast in Toronto.... It was to my understanding they wanted a "happy collage" representing the Chinese experience in Canada. What they actually got were close-ups of images sourced from old photographs of the 1907 anti-Asian riots in Vancouver. Small rebellion. (Yee vii)

Yee's story revolves around the protagonist, Max Lochran, a negotiator working at the Department of Justice. He is the contact person to Linda, a representative of the Chinese Canadian National Council (CCNC). Through the course of the play, Max meets a cast of characters – Tommy Jade, his grandmother and grandfather, Willy, Biff and Happy – each symbolically revealing a puzzle in his personal story and the lives of others with whom he is inadvertently connected. Yee makes Lochran, his leading character, both protagonist and victim, someone who is taken through a journey but perhaps not in charge of the actual outcome. By doing so, the playwright shows the reader how power dynamics tend to be fluid, commenting with subtlety on the ways in which Chinese Canadians dealing with the redress may have felt during the actual negotiations that ensued.

The presence of Danny, Max's highly articulate, autistic son, somehow challenges Lochran's status, as he has to contend with a different form of "otherness," a kind of "imperfection" in his very own family. Readers also learn that Danny's mother (Lochran's wife) is an Asian woman, making Danny a "hapa" and complicating the simple binary between Asian and Caucasian. Despite this fact, Lochran is not so tolerant. He is written as a man full of contradictions and jealousy. When speaking, his prejudices become apparent:

My wife's brother! Perfect example: working the rice paddies in China one minute, not a word of English, a quick boat ride later he's CFO of Merrill-fucking-Lynch... And I'm not being racist, here, I love Oriental girls!.... But they take over and you don't even notice. And now they want – what? – twenty-three mil for something they never even had to go through? (Yee 23)

Despite the presence of hapa characters and interracial affairs, this quote forges a tension between Caucasians and Asians in the play, forcing readers to consider the complexities of redress and intercultural relationships in general.

As mentioned earlier, railroad plays engage in what I call "performing reconciliation," a function that brings contested issues into public view for debate and discussion. In short, railroad plays empower historically marginalized and disenfranchised groups with agency and voice. *lady in the red dress* tackles some of the more controversial issues surrounding redress for Chinese Canadians who paid the Head Tax, including how best to allocate payments (individuals or groups), how to articulate the regret (apology or acknowledgement) and whether or not to include family members and descendants of those who paid but were no longer alive. As mentioned previously, railroad plays need not feature characters who work on the railroad. Rather, a play such as *lady in the red dress* can draw attention to the complex relationship between railroad immigration and exclusionary policies such as the Chinese Head Tax and Chinese Exclusion Act. By drawing attention to modern-day issues such as redress and family history, Yee can place his action in the present (albeit, with some flashbacks in time) while still commenting broadly upon the impact of first-wave immigration on intercultural relationships in Canada.

In the play, a dialogue takes place between Max, from the Ministry of Justice, and Linda, from the Chinese Canadian National Council, in which the two characters debate

some of these issues. On the phone, Max says:

What we're proposing, Linda, is a formal "statement" and a settlement in the amount of X dollars to each of the individuals who paid the Head Tax. If they're still alive. *(beat)* The statement? Well, it's a statement, I don't know... *(beat)* Apology? *(nervous laugh)* We would *prefer* the term "acknowledgement" just to clear up any - what is that - inference around liability. But very respectful. Very... remorseful. Something like: We respect blah blah blah, we welcome Chinese yadda yadda and this won't happen again zippidy do da day. (Yee 5)

The character's rather informal tone sets the mood for what will transpire in the following scenes. Lochran seems less than objective, siding with the government and revealing concerns around issues of liability. This scene re-enacts what may have occurred behind closed doors, as the play was based on the actual events leading up to the following statement made by Prime Minister Stephen Harper on June 22, 2006:

The conditions under which these men worked were at best harsh, and at times impossible: tragically, some one thousand Chinese labourers died building the CPR. But in spite of it all, these Chinese immigrants persevered, and in doing so, helped to ensure the future of Canada.... Not content with the tax's effect, the government subsequently raised the amount to \$100 in 1900, and then to \$500 – the equivalent of two years' wages – in 1903. This tax remained in place until 1923, when the government amended the Chinese Immigration Act and effectively banned most Chinese immigrants until 1947. (Harper)

When *lady in the red dress* premiered at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto on January 24, 2009, many of the redress payments had already been issued. In addition, educational programs were set up for a five-year period, providing grant money to qualified applications launching projects across Canada. As promoted on the website of Citizenship and Immigration Canada:

The Government of Canada established the Community Historical Recognition Program (CHRP) in 2008 for a five-year period. Its purpose was to acknowledge and to educate Canadians about the historical experiences of ethno-cultural communities affected by wartime discriminatory measures and immigration restrictions applied in Canada. ([www.cic.gc.ca](http://www.cic.gc.ca))

The matter of redress is taken up as a core theme in the play, and is directly related to the large wave of immigration that came to British Columbia between the 1850s and 1880s. The fact that the Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion Act was installed after the first wave of immigration points to the reactionary policies that discriminated against the Chinese Canadian population. It should be noted that *The Forbidden Phoenix*, the other railroad play discussed above, received money from the Community Historical Recognition Program, as did *RED LETTERS*, the musical produced by Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre.

Lochran, the protagonist, journeys through the underworld complete with strip-club owners, members of the RCMP who engage in suspect activities, and his own adultery-committing grandmother, learning about his own familial history in the process. As readers, we too become sensitive to the impacts of discrimination on large groups of people. As a contemporary play that uses dramatic technique to engage social activism, *lady in the red dress* is an ideal example of a railroad play.

### **Comparing Chinese Language and Symbols**

The presence of Chinese words in both plays adds another, significant dimension, suggesting that both playwrights are aware of how language can affect meaning and reception. In *The Forbidden Phoenix*, there are no fewer than thirteen uses of *pinyin*, a term used to describe the Romanization of Chinese words. The following words are placed strategically throughout the play: *aiya* (an expression of surprise and displeasure); *ba ba*: (daddy); *ching ee* (a duty to respect nature); *congee* (rice porridge); *gao lou* (towers); *Jung Guo* (The Middle Kingdom, China); *kowtow* (to get on one's knees and

bow); *ku li* (a lower class worker); *law bak go* (a Chinese turnip patty that is fried); *mai lu chien* (a toll); moon cake (a sweet Chinese pastry filled with red bean paste and cooked duck-egg yolk); *wei* (an expression to get one's attention); and *zha yao* (an explosive device) (Chan 71). The English translations would not necessarily be made available to audiences attending a production, suggesting that the playwright is interested in speaking to a Chinese-speaking demographic that would likely be familiar with such terminology.

*The Forbidden Phoenix* alludes to the building of the railroad without actually mentioning dates or naming cities. By doing so, the playwright opens up the meaning of the play to numerous other interpretations, providing a universalized migrant story. After moving through the waterfall that connects China to Canada, the fearless leader, Sun Wukong, finds himself in a place called Terminal City. Of course, those who catch this nuance realize that he is pointing a finger towards Gastown in Vancouver, which is the site of Canadian Pacific Railway's terminus. Locals are aware that Vancouver's nickname is "Terminal City" or "Saltwater City." The first dialogue between Horne and Sun Wukong is both telling and humorous, emulating an exchange between people from different cultures:

Horne

I am Horne, engineer  
Architect of everything here  
From the *gao lou* that stretch to the sun  
To these tracks where the future will run  
Come down right now, monkey man.

Sun Wukong

I am Sun Wukong, visitor here  
A happy tourist a little lost I fear  
I climbed this tower of steel and glass  
If I drop too fast, I'll land on my a—

Horne

Are you mocking me?

Sun Wukong

I'm sorry. I'm not sure how things work here. I'm from Jung Guo. The other side of the waterfall. (Chan 19)

It is quite clear that the "tower of steel and glass" references capitalist infrastructures that now scrape the skyline in Vancouver, and "Jung Guo" references the Middle Kingdom, or China, where Sun Wukong comes from. One of the most prominent symbols in the play is revealed during a Peasant's song, indicated by italicized font:

*The sun wakes at dawn  
But I beat him to the road  
Dust for my breakfast  
Rice to eat after I trade silk for meat  
And I can go home*

Then, the Chorus sings in return:

*On the road  
Buyers don't pay  
On the road  
Thieves hold you at bay  
On the road  
You hope this day  
Will be the last on the road. (Chan 3)*

The passage alludes, so delicately, to the misfortunes of those who came to Canada and the United States as laborers. The road may well be interpreted as the hero's journey, or trade along the silk route, but it easily conjures images of life on the transnational railroad. In *lady in the red dress*, the use of Chinese language is also prevalent. When something is not quite right, the use of Cantonese in the play becomes symbolic for miscommunication and/or messages lost in translation. After Lochran goes into cardiac arrest, he is admitted to Toronto General Hospital. When he asks what day it is, the doctor responds, "Monday, the twenty-eighth," at which point he says, "Today-it's still-that's today. I was in my

office" (Yee 17). The dialogue uses Chinese to showcase misunderstanding or a missing link.

Doctor           Excellent. Now if (*He switches to Cantonese.*) Yue goh yow leung gah foah cheh, joy tung yut see ghan, yow but tung goh foah cheh jam hoi cheut, keu - (*Two trains leave from opposite stations moving at equal speed-*)

Max               What? What did you say?

Doctor           (*sighs*) Yue goh yow leung gah foah cheh, joy tung yut see ghan- (*Two trains leave from opposite stations-*)

Max               English, can you say it in English?

Doctor           (*in English*) Mr. Lochran, I am speaking English. What are you hearing?

Max               I don't know. Gibberish, it sounds like... (Yee 17-18)

In the scene, Lochran is portrayed as somewhat confused, caught between worlds of fantasy and reality. The presence of Cantonese is not an indicator for a character's cultural heritage, *per se*, but rather a symbol for lost familial truths. In some ways, the fact that Max Lochran cannot understand his own doctor showcases his cultural blind-spots. Since he is unable to decipher the secrets of his past, language becomes a barrier rather than a bridge. Thus, readers are given the impression that Lochran is missing a piece of the puzzle, prompting further investigation.

In scene six, the term "symbolic" is used in the play text, provoking readers to think about the differences between financial and moral debt. Here, the word symbolic references the financial transaction and the larger intercultural exchange that is supposed to take place between the Canadian government and Canadians of Chinese descent. Therefore, redress money becomes a repayment for the money charged during the years of the Head Tax, and simultaneously acts as a symbol of intercultural goodwill. In one scene, two government employees share thoughts about the Chinese Canadian National Council's requests for redress:

Hatch	They want more. A "symbolic" twenty-three million, or "recognition" for the descendants. They're accusing us-and I'm paraphrasing here-accusing us of waiting for most of them to die off before making reparations.
Max	That's fucking ridiculous. Symbolic, a "symbolic"- what is that?
Hatch	It's a symbol, Max. (Yee 22)

In the play's foreword, Guillermo Verdecchia unveils the ways in which symbolic payments and legal decisions, while necessary precursors to relationship building, fall short of addressing the full issue of intercultural reconciliation. He writes:

While redress may be a done deal legally and politically, it's far from over psychically.... There is much to work through before the long-term effects of such a history can be left behind. Yee materializes the unseen but powerful psycho-emotional currents that no legal decision can contain or subdue in Sylvia, the lady in the red dress herself. (Verdecchia iv)

In both of these railroad plays, Chinese language and symbols are used by the playwright to suggest an "otherness," and to complicate simple notions of culture and nationality. The presence of pinyin in both scripts is also indicative of the playwrights' desire to connect with an Asian Canadian demographic. Symbols, too, carry weight in both plays: they create associations for the readers that may not be considered. In both *The Forbidden Phoenix* and *lady in the red dress*, language and symbols work in tandem with each other, adding to the complexity of the script and providing additional meaning.

### **Comparing Stylistic Features**

*The Forbidden Phoenix* is written as a musical, suitable for all ages. The premiere in Edmonton was accompanied by a study guide for youth, as was the remount at the Gateway Theatre in Richmond. As such the play contains two types of dialogue. Regular font suggests the text is spoken and italicized font suggests the text is sung. This stylistic

feature of the play provides much potential for the actors and audiences alike, as singing can elicit strong emotions and empathy. By and large, American musicals are known for their often melodramatic treatment of stories dealing with hardship, struggle and emotional heartbreak. That said, this play is decidedly intercultural, not only in its themes but also in style and genre. In the study guide, composer Robert Walsh writes:

One of the biggest challenges in developing the music for *The Forbidden Phoenix* was finding the right blend of Chinese sounds and Western sounds. As creative partners, Marty Chan and I realised that we did not want to replicate an authentic Chinese Opera, nor did we want to write a conventional Western musical, so I borrowed the pieces from each tradition that I thought would serve the play and form a musical landscape all its own. (Walsh 5)

The style of the play, while contemporary in feeling, features characters who are very much planted in a particular time and place. For example, Horne as an authority figure exudes a kind of self-importance, while Sun Wukong as a Chinese immigrant figure seems more humble. Of course this humility is juxtaposed with the mythical traits of his trickster alter-ego: youthful, exuberant, with a wry sense of humor. All of the action takes place in the 1880s, tackling a story full of violence in a way that encourages critical reflection while being careful not to alienate or blame people who may identify with characters such as Horne, the engineer.

The play is written like a fantasy that uses archetypal rather than stereotypical figures. In reading the play, it is very clear that the playwright wishes readers to understand just how characters come to their conclusions. For example, Sun Wukong is asked by Horne to get inside Forbidden Mountain, home of Iron Dragon. It becomes clear that Horne has ulterior motives, wanting to use the dragon's powers for his own benefit. While Horne and Wukong engage in a battle of wits, they eventually agree to share in the same dream for a better life. However, soon after gaining entrance into Forbidden

Mountain, Sun Wukong meets Forbidden Phoenix, who becomes his ally and helps to open his eyes to the truth. In time, they both realize how deceptive Horne has become:

Sun Wukong Horne said you had no respect for any life but your own.  
Phoenix He's the one who doesn't care for life. He's been sending those poor *ku li* here. Their *zha yao* exploded in their hands as they climbed the mountain. (Chan 28)

While the coolies are never seen dying or suffering, the text explicates the hardship in other ways. Song becomes the way to elicit emotional empathy for those working on the railroad. As the passage above describes, Chinese men were exposed to dangerous working conditions. The dialogue refers to actual accounts of Chinese men, who took the task of embedding dynamite into the side of mountains while risking their lives in the process. While more fantastical than realistic, *The Forbidden Phoenix* clearly points to a dark moment in Canada's past. Playwright Marty Chan engages in "performing reconciliation." Rather than focusing on larger, celebratory narratives such as the completion of the railroad or the formation of the New Dominion of Canada, Chan turns the microscope's eye towards an immigrant drama with intimate family dynamics.

As mentioned before, the use of a mythic character, Sun Wukong, also sets readers up for fantastic elements, and giving them a digestible representation of danger and deception. Marty Chan uses the deeply familiar allegory to comment upon a complicated and otherwise dark moment in Canadian history. Lastly, the musical theatre genre provides an ideal way to evoke a myriad of responses and emotions from curious readers, and audiences who go see the actual production.

David Yee takes an altogether different approach to confronting the aftermath of the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Written in a film noir style, *lady in the red dress* hosts a cast of characters mildly reminiscent of hard-boiled detectives,

prompting a kind of suspenseful intrigue. Sylvia, as the lady wearing the red dress, fulfills the role of an archetypal "femme fatale," challenging both racial and sexual stereotypes. And lady's continual use of a knife speaks to the characters' mortality, not to mention all things violent and oppressive. The presence of guns in the play, used to threaten and kill off characters, seems somewhat obvious given the play's film-noir-inspired genre. The stylistic features of the play frame Lochran's journey towards empathy, while the issue of redress and ongoing negotiations between the Department of Justice and the Chinese Canadian National Council remain ever-present, even throughout the multiple shifts in time and place.

The events in *lady in the red dress* switch back and forth between 2006, 1923, 1943, and back to 2006 again. Yee fractures the chronological narrative, invoking what German director Bertolt Brecht called *verfremdungseffekt*. By drawing attention to the play's artifice and creating a distance between audience and artist, spectator and action, the show's format is able to inspire critical acumen. I would argue that surrealist scenes, film-noir features and violent episodes found in *lady in the red dress* inspire audiences to move beyond comfort zones, reflecting upon the experiences of 19th century laborers.

### **Comparing Characters and Relationships**

Back home in China, young Laosan, son of Sun Wukong, is being cajoled and tricked by Dowager, an older, wiser lady. The reference to Empress Dowager is telling. She is described as "Jung Guo's merciless leader. Selfish and self-involved, she wants Laosan to embrace her and renounce his father" (Chan). It is important to note the actual people that these characters are based upon. The real Empress Dowager Cixi ruled over the Qing Dynasty in China, between 1861 and 1908, during a time when there was

growing desire to end ruling dynasties, a tension that was exacerbated by a growing disparity between peasants and bourgeoisie and the dislike of foreign presence in China. By placing Cixi in the play, even metaphorically, Chan comments upon the nature of power relations. As a dominant character, she becomes one of the antagonists that Sun Wukong must contend with.

Writing Cixi into the play gives readers an imaginary reference point and further delineates the nature of humility versus the nature of greed or unbridled power. As such, the play tackles a bigger issue, fracturing simple binaries such as East/West, Caucasian/Asian, good/evil, and deception/truth. Rather than portraying all Chinese as angelic, or demonizing all North Americans, Chan takes a nuanced approach to his character dynamics. As readers, we are forced to assess the motives of each character, not according to their cultural background, but rather by what they say and do to other characters. Chan is careful not to construct an allegory that pits cultural groups against each other. Instead, the individuals in his play find themselves clashing with each other, often over irreconcilable value systems such as capitalism and wealth vs. family.

As the play unfolds, the characters become more aware of their own prejudices. Enemies become friends, and eventually Sun Wukong and Phoenix team up against Horne, who is using Chun – Phoenix’s daughter – to his own advantage. When the powerful bird confronts the engineer, they engage in a battle of brain and brawn. Sun Wukong and Phoenix work together to overcome this force, upholding the rights of the innocent (Chun) and fighting for a better life for their family.

At the end of the play, Sun Wukong returns to claim his son from the Dowager. This moment seems somewhat typical, a familiar trope of sorts, but it works to the

playwright's advantage because it mimics what many railroad workers wanted in the end: to be reunited with their families. As readers, we are reminded of how fulfilling it is to be with family. While the Head Tax is not mentioned in the play, audience members who are familiar with this background will recognize the heart-breaking poignancy of the moment. The last lines of dialogue reveal the message and moral of the play:

Laosan            I love you, Father.

Sun Wukong    I love you.

*They embrace. CHUN returns with the SOLDIERS as they transform into the Monkey King's subjects; hopeful, playful, and innocent.*

All                *Wake up, it's time to rise  
The time has come to breathe  
Strip away sleep's disguise  
And wear my wreath  
And wear my wreath (Yee 66)*

The relationships in *lady in a red dress* are similarly multi-faceted, and often embody the themes contained in the play's arc. Even the supporting characters are given *gravitas* and importance, especially for their ability to reveal some part of the plot and move the story along. Various kinds of intercultural and intergenerational relationships are created in the play; as mentioned earlier, once the Chinese had completed work on the railroad, their presence was unwanted and further assimilation was prevented through the establishment of the Head Tax and Exclusion Act. The inclusion and retelling of these laborers' stories in *lady in the red dress* effectively counter the absence of such subjects in political, social and artistic affairs of the day. Arguably, the characters in the play contribute to what Marvin Carlson refers to as a "ghosting" effect. In *The Haunted Stage: Theatre As Memory Machine*, Carlson refers to the potential of bodies to contribute to stage-based imagery:

There is, however, a very different sort of external ghosting that in many periods of theatre history has been evoked by the bodies onstage.... Here the external ghosting is not provided by previous acquaintance with the "real-life" existence of the actors but by previous acquaintances with the abstract positions their bodies assume onstage. (Carlson 112)

This description can be readily applied to the presence of Tommy Jade, an early Chinese immigrant who gives \$600 to Mr. Coogan, an immigration official, in order to be reunited with his wife. Tommy Jade's character and the abstract representation of his body is profound, for it seeks to revisit the "ghosts" of Chinese laborers by giving them a presence onstage. Tommy Jade's character is historical because he comes from a moment in the past. Yet he is also contemporary, since he is played in the present by an actor in the flesh. This is the power of "ghosting," a phenomenon that seems prevalent in plays that reference historical events and characters.

Other kinds of relationships challenge notions of purity and/or race-based identity, such as Asian Canadian or Scottish Canadian. As a playwright of mixed Chinese and Scottish descent, Yee knows well the false hierarchies and pitfalls of race-based exclusionary policies. His characters often transcend the simple binaries of Asian/Caucasian. Instead, he writes in people who are "hapa," a term often used to describe people of mixed blood or descent. In one scene, Lochran goes back into time. He finds out how Sylvia becomes his grandmother's illegitimate daughter, born out of wedlock. Mirabel is left at home by Daniel Coogan (Lochran's grandfather), who is out of town on official business. When Tommy Jade comes to the door, looking to see how money has helped his wife get into Canada, Mirabel gives him opium and seduces him:

Mirabel            So maybe I like that too, don't I? Tommy - Tommy Jade. You got a wife, Tommy? Is she lonely without you? I'm lonely, Tommy. I'm very lonely.

*Tommy tries to resist, but the opium incapacitates him, weakens him, and despite himself, he enjoys it.*

Just lay back, Tommy Jade, this is official business.

*She begins to take off her clothes. (Yee 69)*

Tommy Jade and Mirabel have a daughter, now seen as Sylvia (the femme fatale) throughout the play. Not too long afterwards, in scene nineteen, Max's son Danny and Sylvia are bonding over their mixed heritage. While playing with a deck of cards, both share pride in their "special status."

Danny	My half-and-half card. My Queen of Sparts. Half-and-half. Like me. Just like me.
	<i>Beat.</i>
Sylvia	Me too.
Danny	We're special.
Sylvia	We're mongrels. Mutts. We're...less.
Danny	That's not what Max said. ( <i>Sylvia scoffs</i> )Max said no one can call me a mutt. He said ( <i>aping MAX</i> ) "Danny is not-what is that-half anything...(the impression fades) Danny is twice blessed." The best of Max and the best of mother. Twice blessed. Like you. (Yee 84)

When Danny refers to the Queen of Sparts, he is making a play-on-words, mixing Queen of Hearts and Queen of Spades. This confusion of motifs is his way of drawing attention to his own racial hybridity. As persons of intercultural descent, both Danny and Sylvia become cultural mediators, holding a space between their maternal and paternal cultures. Such depictions can help to reference and complicate simple notions of race-based identity.

### **Comparing References to Historical Injustices**

*The Forbidden Phoenix* speaks about injustice without directly alluding to the exact circumstances of the Chinese who came to Canada during the 1880s. Instead, the playwright allows readers and audiences to make the connections between the characters

in the play and the immigrants they come to represent. The Forbidden Mountain, for example, is a metaphor for "Gold Mountain," a term used to describe the West Coast of US and Canada, the area where most of the railroad workers ended up. Similarly, the play's reference to "Terminal City," while vague and unhistorical, is nonetheless suggestive of Vancouver. Throughout the play, there are subtle mentions of "laying track," and the dangerous consequences of using dynamite (zha yao). In real life, Chinese laborers experienced a certain kind of discrimination and were often forced into risky, life-threatening circumstances, such as embedding dynamite into cavernous rock of mountains. In this way, the play alludes to real historical circumstances even if those circumstances are never explicitly named.

*The Forbidden Phoenix* deals with historical injustices in a manner that is readily accessible to a wide social demographic, whether young, old, local and/or immigrant communities. While specific historical injustices - the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Head Tax, and the inability of Chinese to vote - are not directly mentioned in the play, the playwright does focus on the barriers and challenges that Sun Wukong experiences as a newcomer, making it clear that he must overcome the prejudice and greed of others in order to be with family.

The play exposes Canadian audiences to Chinese myths and characters within a recognizable format of a hero's journey. By using Sun Wukong as a protagonist, Chan is able to transcend geographic and national state-sanctioned borders to show the interconnectedness of people. As articulated in *Journeys to Journeys to the West*:

As Chinese cultural artifacts such as *Journey to the West* come to circulate within a transnational space outside of the ostensible geographic borders of China "proper," they not only force us to rethink the relevance of China with respect to a variety of Western and "Westernized" societies outside or at the margins of

China's physical borders, but also challenge our understanding of the ostensible "Chineseness" of the original text. (Rojas 350)

Whereas *The Forbidden Phoenix* is suggestive in its attempt to address past racial prejudices, *lady in the red dress* takes a more direct approach, giving voices to the disenfranchised (Tommy Jade, Danny) and revealing the crude intolerance of other principal characters (Hatch, Max, Coogan). At least two moments in history are used to frame and illuminate the impact of the Head Tax. In a 1923 flashback, Max's grandfather, Coogan, and Tommy Jade strike a deal behind closed doors. Jade pays Coogan \$600 to have his wife brought to Canada, with no success. Later in the story, Tommy Jade's diary provides documentation for the Chinese Canadian National Council, some 83 years later, when they are trying to prove that government officials took money legally and illegally from immigrants. The exchange represents the rather slippery slope between accepting state-sanctioned discrimination and finding alternatives to such constraining circumstances. In scene three, titled "Tommy vs. The Dominion of Canada," the two men exchange a promise:

Tommy	Six month. Okay.
Coogan	Attaboy. August 1923. I promise.
Tommy	Okay. ( <i>Beat. He bows his head to COOGAN, a humble servant.</i> ) Thank you.
Coogan	Sure. Sure, Tommy. Now, just remember, okay? Government, <i>bad</i> . Coogan, <i>good</i> . Coogan, <i>friend</i> . But Coogan get in lots of trouble if anyone find out about this. Okay? So, don't tell-no tell, okay?

*Tommy presses his lips shut and smiles.* (Yee 16)

Tommy Jade's experience represents the hundreds of Chinese Canadians who paid the Head Tax between 1885 and 1923. Jade's desperation to be reunited with his wife is written into the play text as an integral element of the whole story. However, the moments that book-end the play clearly point to the issue of redress. In the beginning of

the play, Linda, the representative for the Chinese Canadian National Council, negotiates with Max Lochran, who works with the Department of Justice. The last scene of the play emulates the first scene, with Linda on the phone with Max, drawing readers full circle. By the end of the play, Lochran has been taken back into time; he has survived cardiac arrest and been made to reconcile with his own family's involvement in the Chinese Head Tax. As audiences, we never see the end result, but that is secondary, because we know the real Canadian government has engaged in reconciliatory attempts in 2006. Regardless, Yee provides us with a cliff-hanger that places the protagonist in the same position as he found himself at the beginning. The playwright leaves the audience watching Lochran as he is about to take phone calls from Hatch and Linda, respectively.

Secretary        I know, Mr. Lochran, but you have Thomas Hatch on line one, he says it's urgent.

Max                Can you just-

Secretary        And you have Linda from the CCNC on line two, she also says it's urgent.

*MAX looks at DANNY.*

Max                Danny, I-

Danny             *(without looking up)* It's okay.

*Beat.*

Secretary        Mr. Lochran?

Max                I...just gimme a...

Danny             Dad.

*Beat. They look at each other for a moment.*

                      It's okay.

*Beat.*

Secretary        Mr. Lochran? Line one or line two?

*MAX goes to his phone. He slips on his earpiece. He takes a deep breath. He presses a line. He opens his mouth.*

*Blackout.*

*End of play. (Yee 94)*

While I was writing this essay, an article appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, which states: "Jason Kenney, Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism Minister, recently celebrated the end of the Community Historical Recognition Program. Left unmentioned

that day was the fact that \$500,000 of the \$5-million destined for Chinese Canadian projects had not been spent. Now that the program has ended, the remaining money has been clawed back into government revenue" (Friesen). Analyzing the *lady in the red dress* while simultaneously finding such a newspaper article is ironic yet reinforcing: a case of life imitating art and art imitating life. This situation begs the question: How long does reconciliation take and how do we acknowledge intercultural conflict with the intention of overcoming such gaps? Given the increasing reliance on the Asia Pacific as an exchange partner, Canada must continue to consider its relationship to China, and her inhabitants, whether onstage or within political spheres. The fact that intercultural theatre is wrestling with complex and sensitive issues is somewhat reassuring.

As a contemporary play, *The Forbidden Phoenix* brings together musical elements from both western and eastern traditions. References to the railroad are subtle and placed within a fantastic allegory with fighting animals, birds and dragons. Playwright Marty Chan uses Chinese words to speak directly to his audience, and the use of pinyin among English dialogue shows that he is interested in theatre that fuses intercultural elements. The presence of the Monkey King hero from the epic novel *Journey to the West* allows Chan to speak to audiences familiar with the Chinese myth. At the same time, his protagonist's journey becomes representative of the immigrants' journey, and is quite likely to resonate with Canadians of all ages and cultural backgrounds.

By contrast, *lady in the red dress* is a play influenced by the elements in film noir. David Yee's play features characters such as the "femme fatale," the gun wielding government official, and street-smart radio personalities, all of whom complicate a multi-

layered narrative comprised of flashbacks, dream sequences, and character-based foreshadowing. In the play, Chinese language is a symbol for miscommunication, for being "lost in translation," and this happens between Lochran and his Chinese-speaking doctor. The multiple changes in time and location mimic those used in cinema, creating a surreal, almost anti-climactic pacing. Yee's approach to dealing with social injustices is forthright, and would likely appeal to Canadians interested in wrestling with these critical issues. With no easy answers in sight, *lady in the red dress* provokes and inspires thought.

As contrasting works of theatre, *The Forbidden Phoenix* and *lady in the red dress* are examples of railroad plays, referencing the impacts of immigration and the railroad on intercultural relationships and social justice. By using dramatic techniques such as characterization, language and symbols, narrative, and references to the past, both playwrights attempt to address a troubled past that includes the Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese Head Tax and oppressive treatment of laborers in Canada. They engage in "performing reconciliation" and, in the process, give us a better sense of our rich and complex national history.

In the next chapter I focus on *Dance and the Railroad*, a play written by American playwright David Henry Hwang. Beginning with a plot summary, I examine various features of the play text, similar to the manner in which I examined the other two plays. In addition, I comment on the 1998 Vancouver production, mounted by a semi-professional team, which premiered at the Telus Studio in the Chan Centre for Performing Arts in August of 1998. Following is an analysis of the play text as well as the actual production. Taking into consideration the fact that *The Dance and the Railroad* is written by America's most renowned playwright of Asian descent, I argue that railroad

plays have the ability to cross national and cultural borders. While Hwang's play is situated in the Sierra Nevada of California, the Vancouver production was very much grounded and received through West Coast Canadian sensibilities.

I played the principal role of Lone in *Dance and the Railroad*, and was present throughout a lengthy creative process. Some fifteen years later, my critical distance and insider's knowledge allow me to comment upon decisions made and how they impacted the overall production. By reviewing video footage from the 1998 Vancouver production, I am also able to engage in a visual critique the same way as would any other scholar.

### ***Chapter Three: Staging The Dance and the Railroad***

*The Dance and the Railroad*, by David Henry Hwang, is another example of a railroad play that uses theatre as a medium to engage social activism by "performing reconciliation" onstage. Like the two other plays, this play tackles issues pertinent to the first wave of migrant Chinese workers who came to North America. The play is a coming-of-age story that mixes bittersweet moments of nostalgia with more exacting representations of immigrant hardship and struggle. Written in 1981, the play has experienced numerous revivals throughout the United States and Canada. This show, along with *F.O.B.*, his first play, essentially introduced the young playwright to New York audiences via the Joseph Papp Public Theatre. *The Dance and the Railroad* opened off-Broadway and garnered Hwang a Chinese American Arts Council award, a Drama Desk nomination, and a spot in the "Theatre in America" series. The two principal characters in *The Dance and the Railroad* deal with socio-political and cultural change. Originally performed by John Lone and Tzi Ma, who contributed greatly to the creative process, the characters are named after the original actors.

Influenced in part by other writing coming out of the Asian American population, the play draws parallels to Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, which recalled memories of the author's grandfather and his work in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California, not far from the Gold Rush and Central Railway. The play, like the book, fictionalizes historical events by blending fact with imagination. Hwang has spoken numerous times about Hong's work, citing her as an influence and pioneer. As an English major studying at Stanford, he would have known about *China Men*, which was

published in 1980 and won the National Book Award for Nonfiction in 1981, the same year *The Dance and the Railroad* premiered.

The Vancouver premiere in 1998, seventeen years after its New York debut, hints at the show's cross-border appeal. I played the principal role of Lone in *The Dance and the Railroad*, and was present throughout a lengthy creative process. As I write my thesis fifteen years after participating in the Vancouver production, I have a critical distance but also an insider's knowledge that allows me to reflect upon the qualities and aesthetics of the production.

In chapter three, I analyze the dramatic text of *The Dance and the Railroad* in a similar fashion to the way in which I analyze *The Forbidden Phoenix* and *lady in the red dress* in chapter two, but focus more on characterization, references to historical injustices, and the concept of home and memory. In addition to the dramatic analysis, I reference video footage from the 1998 Vancouver production. By doing so, I am able to engage in both literary and visual critique, with the advantage of commenting on how dramatic text manifests in production.

### **Textual Analysis and Performance Review**

I consider *The Dance and the Railroad* to be a definitive railroad play, one that features historical characters based on real-life circumstances. Hwang uses the immigrant or frontier story to situate the action on a mountaintop near the transcontinental railroad, in June 1867, to be exact. Thus audience members become privy to the actual struggle of the railroad workers, not merely through flashbacks or memory, but through direct exposure to their lifestyle as presented onstage. In the first scene, Lone, aged 20, and Ma,

aged 18, meet on top of the mountain, where Lone is practicing his Chinese opera gestures. The dialogue quickly reveals the situation surrounding the two men:

Ma                    That stuff you're doing – it's beautiful. Why don't you do it for the guys at camp? Help us celebrate?  
Lone                  What will "this stuff" help celebrate?  
Ma                    C'mon. The strike, of course. Guys on the railroad gang, we gotta stick together, you know.  
Lone                  This is something to celebrate?  
Ma                    Yeah. Yesterday, the weak-kneed ChinaMen, they were running around like chickens without a head: "The white devils are sending their soldiers! Shoot us all!" But now, look – day four, see? Still in one piece. Those soldiers – we've never seen a gun or a bullet.  
Lone                  So you're all warrior-spirits, huh?  
Ma                    They're scared of us, Lone – that's what it means. (Hwang 65)

In this scene, the mention of "guys on the railroad" automatically situates the action for the reader. Presenting two coolies working in America and living within unforgiving circumstances foreshadows the struggle that both must face and overcome. And while the context reveals an obviously strained relationship with their superiors, Hwang gives both protagonists, particularly Lone, undeniable agency. The kind of power ascribed to Lone is rarely seen in such minority characters, leading audiences away from feeling sorry for his plight, and towards an emotional engagement that allows viewers to empathize with his immense courage and self-mastery.

While popular rhetoric suggests that Chinese railroad workers were willing to work for less money, numerous factors were responsible for the fact that Chinese workers were offered lower-than-average wages. In addition to discriminatory practices, those in charge of the laborers were under strict timelines and budgets. Whereas advertisements and smear campaigns at the time portrayed Chinese laborers as underpaid, down-trodden or totally in servitude, the coolies in *The Dance and the Railroad* are proactive and full of resistance. One scene in the play is based on an actual strike that took place in June 1867,

during the construction of the Central Railway in the United States. While not highly publicized in popular literature, the strike is given prominence in this play. Hwang uses this struggle as a backdrop to examine the unique relationship between two men who find themselves in less than desirable conditions.

Douglas Street, author of the Western Writers Series on David Henry Hwang, is interested in the meeting between the Pacific Rim and United States. What results, he argues, is a repository for stories relating to the Asian-American West:

For Hwang and a new generation of Asian-American voices, the keys to unlock the vitality of their heritage are to be found in the American West – the railroad, the Mother Lode, the bygone joss houses in gold rush towns like Chinese Camp. In these lie the Oriental heritage and the anguish of forgotten Western American trailblazers. (5-6)

Street is speaking about the point of contact, and the origins of a group of people who came to America to help build the country. However, the author fails to mention that there may be other stories that define Asian-American characters. In *The Dance and the Railroad*, the playwright teases out Lone's background, for he has yet another history and story to share. Trained as an opera singer, Lone specializes in playing the role of Gwan Gung, a mythic and mighty Chinese warrior-god full of power, virility, and status. Although Lone is detached both physically and emotionally from his fellow coolies, his inner strength and status compensates for this isolation.

As a former opera performer, Lone is given additional context and personal history. He shares his inimitable life story with Ma, his younger and more gullible cohort:

I entered Opera School when I was ten years old. My parents decided to sell me for ten years to this opera company. I lived with eighty other boys and we slept in bunks four beds high and hid our candy and rice cakes from each other.... One day, I was summoned by my master, who told me I was to go home for two days, because my mother had fallen very ill and was dying. When I arrived home, Mother was standing at the door waiting, not sick at all. Her first words to me, the

son away for eight years, were “You’ve been playing while your village has starved. You must go to the Gold Mountain to work.” (Hwang 78)

By providing readers with this back story, Hwang is able to complicate the notion of a race-based hierarchy, which was more prevalent during the mid-nineteenth century. The playwright uses storytelling as a way to conjure nostalgia and give the protagonist more dimension. Arguably, the lengthy exposition by Lone helps to elicit emotional empathy from the reader, who is encouraged to identify with that struggle and loss. Thus, memories of home and childhood become important for the character, especially in terms of providing a sense of comfort. In her article, "Homeland under Attack," Daphne Lei suggests:

Both the present “American” home here, and the far away ancestral “Asian” home are somewhat imaginary and need constant reaffirmation. While the fluidity of the American home is relatively visible because of the changing demographic of the Asian American nation, the Asian home has to remain unchanged in order to provide a stable source for nostalgia. (36)

However, there may be consequences to the temporary, conceptual comforts of home.

Is it possible that memory tinged with nostalgia can trump the actual suffering of forefathers? Even when fully aware of the plight of their ancestors, the current generation of Asian North Americans does not have to contend with the same kind of discrimination and homesickness as did first-generation pioneers. Hwang brings attention to these forefathers in *The Dance and the Railroad*. Despite their longing for home, they were caught in a state of endless work and homelessness. Tired and frustrated as they are, Lone and Ma need to assert their own sense of agency. Linda Hutcheon suggests:

In political discourse, indigenization is used within a national setting to refer to the forming of a national discourse different from the dominant.... But the advantage of the more general anthropological usage in thinking about adaptation is that it implies agency: people pick and choose what they want to

transplant to their own soil. Adapters of traveling stories exert power over what they adapt. (150)

In the play, both characters honor Gwang Gung, asserting their right to align themselves with a character who is revered and powerful. They keep his story alive, even as the strike below is being resolved.

Clearly, *The Dance and the Railroad* speaks back to the dominant culture to which it now belongs. The critical reception of the play, and the various awards it has garnered over the years, suggests that the play now enjoys a high level of recognition. Perhaps the play can be considered the first contemporary "Asian American classic" by default of its popularity. Many working in New York's theatre community would likely concur. Thirty-two years after its premiere, New York audiences were once again exposed to *The Dance and The Railroad*. The five-week run of *The Dance and the Railroad* that began February 5, 2013 was recently held over to March 24th, 2013,<sup>6</sup> a major achievement in a city with fierce competition and numerous theatre alternatives. Hwang is currently serving a residency at the Signature Theatre, which allows him to revisit three major shows: two remounts and the creation of an original.

While textual analysis can yield satisfying results, there is no substitute for attending a live stage production and commenting upon its qualities and aesthetics. The following is a performance analysis of the Vancouver premiere of *The Dance and The Railroad*, which had a three-day run in the BC Telus Studio located in the Chan Centre for Performing Arts at the University of British Columbia. Having access to the video footage of the show has proven beneficial. While dramatic text can be analyzed for its

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<sup>6</sup> David Henry Hwang is currently serving as "Residency One" playwright at The Signature Theatre in New York. In addition to remounting *Golden Child* in 2012, and *The Dance and the Railroad* in 2013, Hwang is currently writing *Kung Fu*, a new play about Bruce Lee, that will premiere in 2014.

linguistic properties, a theatrical performance can be watched and analyzed for directorial choices, performance elements and audience reaction. The video footage of the 1998 production of *The Dance and the Railroad* reveals much about the ways in which staging can reinforce a playwright's intentions, and by default of its social aspect, connect actors and audiences through a shared experience. The Vancouver premiere was directed by BA theatre student Ben Sharabi and brought together students from the University and artists from the professional community. Consequently, I would consider the production semi-professional. All of the design, including the set, costumes, and lighting, was overseen by MFA design student Ella Constantinescu. The production also included musical arrangement by Josh Broyles, and sound design by Ziv Kowarsky. Three members of the UBC Chinese Musical Ensemble provided live accompaniment on stage. The production team also included Yuan-Tzeng Hsia and Lee Hsiao-Ying Hsia, who trained in Chinese Opera, and Eury Chang and Clay Hastings, actors cast from outside the University. As a UBC Summer Stock production, the cast and crew had access to the Binning Studios for rehearsal. Designed by Bing Thom, the BC Telus Studio in the Chan Centre was home to this production, and had just opened the year before. *The Dance and the Railroad* was the first student-initiated semi-professional production to occupy that space.

I will examine three elements of the 1998 Vancouver production: the presence of physical choreography, audience response, and intercultural elements. *The Dance and the Railroad* is similar to *The Forbidden Phoenix* and *lady in the red dress* in terms of its engagement with social activism. However, the play manifests itself in a genre that is not only intercultural but also interdisciplinary, combining music with dialogue with acrobatics and movement. Physicality plays a big part in the Vancouver production. In

many scenes, choreography enhances the dramatic elements, providing additional meaning to the show. For instance, the text references at least two animals: the duck and the locust. In scene three, Ma, in his naivety, thinks that he and Lone can make a lot of money on the railroad and then return to China. In the production, Lone tries to make a point by figuratively transforming first into a duck, then a locust, and making Ma do the same. As excitable animals, both actors waddle across the stage, animating the space with "quacks." Clearly, this kind of performance breaks from the expected naturalism of upright humans in order to embrace more physical and abstract kinds of representation. According to Lone, the transformation from human to duck becomes a symbol for how Chinese immigrants must adapt to working on the railroad. Lone shares thoughts on taking on a job that he wasn't trained to do.

Lone	You couldn't, could you? Could you be a duck for that long?
Ma	Look, I wasn't born to be either of those.
Lone	Exactly. Well, I wasn't born to work on the railroad, either. "Best of both worlds." How can you be such an insect? (Hwang 82)

In the play text, scene three begins with the stage directions, "Lone and Ma are doing physical exercises" (Hwang 75). The cast took this as an opportunity to recall and re-enact the immense discipline that is required for Chinese Opera training. In rehearsals, Yuan-Tzeng Hsia suggested a series of calisthenics exercises. In the scene, the character Ma finds each exercise quite difficult. The first is a warrior pose with staff behind the back; Lone corrects him once and shows disapproval upon Ma's second attempt. Ma finds the head stand equally difficult, exemplified by his flailing legs. When in a deep lunge, like a squat, Ma's facial expressions reveal his anguish. When he tries to stand up, Lone swiftly kicks the back of his knees. The physicality is broken up into sequences, punctuated by lighting that signifies the passing of time. In these physical scenes, the

humor is drawn out. Audiences see the fascinating dynamics of the master-student, railroad-buddy relationship evolve over time. Ma reveals his impatience while working through these physical exercises:

Ma                    How long will it be before I can play Gwan Gung?  
Lone                  How long before a dog can play the violin? (Hwang 75)

Throughout the production, text is layered with physicality. The fact that Lone is a trained Opera performer provides not only the cultural reference, but also the impetus for including calisthenics, martial arts, and opera gestures in the *mise-en-scene*. In addition to two stick fights involving the use of staffs, both characters use props and physicality to create imaginary worlds. In scene five, both men use the staff as paddles as they row through the river. When the scene shifts to the bottom of a boat, the actors sit back-to-back on a log. As the sound of waves echoes through the Telus Studio, the actors' backs undulate with each splash. Soon one of the characters passes away, reminding us of the dangerous conditions in which migrants often traveled when crossing the seas in hope of a new life.

At times, the character of Lone seems angry, and the actor plays him as if he is embittered by the world around him, using tone and volume to express the inner workings of his world. This is evident in scene two, when Lone speaks his mind to Ma.

Lone                    It's ugly to practice when the mountain has turned your muscles to ice. When my body hurts too much to come here, I look at the other ChinaMen and think, "They are dead. Their muscles work only because the white man forces them. I live because I can still force my muscles to work for me." Say it. "They are dead."  
(Hwang 73)

Of course, a character who finds himself in such a situation may seem justifiably angry, yet I question the overemphasis on this emotion throughout the show. This was partly a

directorial and performance choice made during the rehearsals. Watching the show brings to mind the comedic duos of television, which often play polar opposites against each other: one man is "straight" and the other one is "funny." This dynamic is ever-present in *The Dance and the Railroad*. Lone's emotional life and anger seek to elicit a critical response from the audiences, provoking them to question the cause of his grief. And yet I find myself distanced from feeling fully empathetic. This makes me wonder if railroad plays should focus on eliciting audience empathy, or whether they should instead reveal the harsh discrimination and social injustices of a by-gone time. In either case, a careful balance is required in order to provoke deep feelings and empathy as well as a desire for change. There are times, of course, when Lone shows a more vulnerable side. In scene three, when telling Ma that playing warrior characters does not come easily, the actor's blend of forthrightness and vulnerability allows us to see him as a suffering human. The actor says:

Lone            I entered opera school when I was ten years old. My parents decided to sell me for ten years to this opera company. I lived with eighty other boys and we slept in bunks four beds high and hid our candy and rice cakes from each other. After eight years, I was studying to play Gwan Gung.... I went from a room with eighty boys to a ship with three hundred men. So, you see, it does not come easily to play Gwan Gung. (Hwang 78)

When he says this line, the actor holds himself, as if comforting what is obviously a bittersweet memory. These moments provide space for the audience to listen deeply and begin to empathize with someone who seems sad and homesick.

Watching the video footage provides additional information, such as audience response and reception. In many instances throughout the show, the audience laughs at particular lines and moments. By going back to the play text and looking at the lines, we

may be able to assess how audiences interpret the meaning of the scenes. When Ma admits to wanting to learn the opera, Lone is reluctant. But Ma insists, suggesting that he will go back to China and tell stories of the Gold Mountain. Lone shares a story, not unlike folklore, that tells about a family learning how the third son has become an actor.

He says:

When the parents hear that their son has become only an actor, they are very sad. The mother beats her head against the ground until the ground, out of pity, opens up and swallows her. The father is so angry he can't even speak, and the anger builds up inside him until it blows his body to pieces – little bits of his skin are found hanging from trees days later. You don't know how you endanger your relatives by becoming an actor. (Hwang 67)

At the moment of the last line, the audience laughs uproariously. It is a moment that is self-referential, not only because the audiences know they are watching actors, but because the show is presented to an audience that is likely comprised of UBC theatre students and actors. This laughter can be understood as indicative of a kind of empathy between actors. Even though the actors onstage and the actors in the audience may not share the same cultural heritage, there is an observable reaction and recognition that transcends cultural difference. As such, the plight of actors – often referred to as "poor, starving artists" – becomes a cross-cultural bridge between the performers onstage, almost universal in appeal. In other words, the presence of Asian characters onstage does not prevent non-Asian audience members from understanding the subtleties and humor in the script. Rather, Hwang's multi-layered script allows audiences to empathize with his characters on cultural, familial and personal levels.

Throughout the play, the reference to the railroad is ever present. In particular, this play deals with the unequal pay and long hours that Chinese laborers endured.

Hwang deals with the strike in the dialogue that follows. In the Vancouver production,

the crowd also laughs when Lone says, "I am a white devil! Listen to my stupid language: "Wha che doo doo blah blah." Look at my wide eyes – like I have drunk seventy-two pots of tea. Look at my funny hair – twisting, turning, like a snake telling lies. (*To Ma*) Bla bla doo doo tee tee." At which point, Ma simply responds: "We don't understand English" (Hwang 93). The last line turns the tables, suggesting that foreign languages are spoken by people around the world. While Chinese may seem confusing for an English speaking native, English – despite its dominance as the world's *lingua franca* – may well seem confusing to a person who has never heard English spoken before. This reverse psychology is effective in the play, and understood well by the audience members. As the camera pans through the crowd it becomes obvious that the majority of the audience members are Caucasian. It is interesting to take note of their laughter, and high level of empathy and acceptance of the characters.

While Lone and Ma exude a certain kind of agency and independence, I believe that audience members see them as subservient in comparison to their superiors. The playwright gives reason for the "underdogs" or laborers to be frustrated, angry and resentful of the "white devils." In reality, David Henry Hwang is a middle-class American, and arguably, he is privileged enough to move within artistic circles in New York, and beyond. Rather than alienating Caucasian audience members, many of whom support his work, Hwang allows the railroad workers to blow off steam and mock their superiors. By seeing otherwise lowly characters react in this way, he shatters the myth of the "model minority," allowing them to challenge the long hours they are expected to work, as well as the unequal payments received by railroad workers. Hwang engages in a reverse criticism whereby inferiors are able to make fun of superiors. I believe that such a

moment gives audiences the license to laugh at stereotypes, allowing them to empathize with the railroad characters who must find ways to cope with their own experience of discrimination and prejudice.

The 1998 Vancouver production of *The Dance and the Railroad* was truly intercultural in aesthetic. The three musicians from the UBC Chinese Music Ensemble were not of Chinese descent; rather, they were Caucasian students interested in ethnomusicology and Chinese musical traditions. All the musicians play traditional Chinese instruments such as the *pipa* (a four-stringed instrument, like a guitar) and *xiao* (a bamboo flute), and metal gong. The musical arrangement is juxtaposed with a few sound cues, such as swarming locusts and howling wolves, played digitally over the loudspeaker. Seeing Caucasian musicians perform alongside the "Asian-looking"<sup>7</sup> actors creates a unique intercultural aesthetic and experience.

Costumes are another intercultural element in the Vancouver production. For example, the three Caucasian musicians wear traditional Chinese *changshan*, or black long shirt-jackets with white accents, while the two railroad workers wear clothing that is less culturally-oriented: long black silken pants and loose tank tops cut off at the sleeves. The mixture of these production elements from both Eastern and Western traditions creates, in turn, creates an intercultural production that references history within a contemporary theatrical framework.

The set design, while minimal, is also suggestive of the time period. A long piece of beige canvas is strung from the ceiling. It hangs from the sky as if suggesting a tall peaked landscape or Sierra Nevada mountain top. The canvas is splattered with black

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<sup>7</sup> Eury Chang, who plays the character Lone, is a Canadian of Chinese descent, while Clay Hastings, who plays the character Ma, is a Canadian "hapa," of mixed Chinese, Scottish and English descent. I use the term "Asian-looking" to suggest that both actors can pass as Chinese characters .

paint, suggestive of the grey boulders, or coal, or dirt from the railroad. And when seen from the perspective of the audience, the canvas is vaguely reminiscent of a Chinese painting, the kind with delicate, black brush strokes that emulate the flora of the vast landscape of China.

Reflecting upon the production now, with additional knowledge and more life experience, I am able to comment objectively upon the way in which the production was promoted. Simple black-and-white 8" x 11" posters were distributed around campus, as were slightly larger letter size flyers with a grey image of a mountaintop. The fact that the semi-professional production had less access to resources was not detrimental to the spirit of the company. However, the lack of finances resulted in duties related to marketing and publicity falling on the shoulders of the cast and crew members. While the Opening Night of the show was documented on video, attracting a full house, the other two nights were not as well attended. Of course, in professional theatre, and even with regular Department of Theatre and Film season productions, there is a dedicated staff on hand to oversee outreach, marketing and publicity. As someone who has also worked as an editor for arts publications, I can now see the necessity of such a function. The 1998 Vancouver production was unable to tap into the Asian Canadian demographic in Vancouver, simply because few people involved in the production at that time were qualified or connected with media channels. As a production with an interest in issues related to Canadians of Chinese descent, *The Dance and the Railroad* had great potential to speak directly to Canadians of Chinese descent, and perhaps a wider theatre-going public in Vancouver. Such publicity could have placed the show on the radar of critics, writers and other ethnic

media, drawing attention to Hwang's work in the same way that the recent 2013 production in New York resulted in sold-out houses and an extended run.

At the end of the show, one person from the audience leaps out of her seat to give a standing ovation. Members of the audience continue to clap throughout the first curtain call and until the actors leave the stage, encouraging them to return for a second curtain call.<sup>8</sup> By clapping, the audience members recognize the efforts of the entire cast and crew. I would argue that this mutual recognition is important in railroad plays, since the plays' moral stance and interest in social justice requires acceptance from Asian Canadians as well as the general public.

Clearly, railroad plays can be analyzed for their dramatic and literary properties, as well as the ways in which they manifest as live stage productions. Accessing video footage can help theatre scholars draw conclusions about the production elements and how they affect audience reception. I have used both play text and video of *The Dance and the Railroad* to further my argument that railroad plays are important works of art for the Asian Canadian and Asian American people. Furthermore, these plays speak to social justice in a way that references the nuances of culturally specific history. Watching audience members laugh and applaud at various moments in the play suggests that the laborers in the play are people that audiences can relate to, despite differences in their cultural heritage and class. Perhaps the characters onstage are not so different from us. The 1998 Vancouver production of *The Dance and the Railroad* managed to bring attention to the social injustices of the nineteenth century, and did so in a manner that was both entertaining and accessible for audiences of all cultural backgrounds.

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<sup>8</sup> Watching the video footage of *The Dance and the Railroad* provided additional information, not just about directorial choices but the places where audiences expressed their joy, empathy, and appreciation. The full hour-long show was documented on *Opening Night*: August 7, 1998.

## *Conclusion*

As discussed earlier, the railroad is vitally important infrastructure that allowed governments on both sides of the border to connect their citizens living on the Eastern seaboard with those living in the West. Chinese immigration and its connection to the construction and completion of the transcontinental railways was very much a West Coast phenomenon. Not only were there parallel developments in both countries, there was also an exchange of labor. That is to say, the timeline and settlement of Chinese people on the West Coast is similar on both sides of the border. People from southeast China came to work in San Francisco, during the gold rush, and eventually made their way to Barkerville. Sage writes about the relationship between the CPR and the continued formation of the Dominion of Canada.

The return of Sir John A. Macdonald and the Conservatives to power in 1878 put an end to the secession movement and led to the chartering of the new company which built the railway. Over that railway from 1886 to 1901 came thousands of eastern Canadians who were to become the cement binding British Columbia more closely to the rest of the Dominion. (18)

Later, Chinese immigrants living in the United States were brought to British Columbia, in large numbers, in order to fill the labor needed to complete the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in a timely fashion. There is no doubt that the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway and Central Railways, respectively, was important to the growth of both countries and the relationship between them. Canadians of European descent also worked on the CPR in large numbers, suggesting that we should look at the railroad as a site of intercultural activity.

Railroad plays could help theatre scholars to understand intercultural relationships. By studying the ways in which these characters relate, we can somehow envision their

historical realities, becoming more attuned to their hardships and struggles. Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert suggest:

What postcolonial theory offers to current debates about interculturalism is a framework for analyzing such thorny issues as agency, hybridity, and authenticity, issues that lie at the heart of intercultural praxis. With its insistent stress on historicity and specificity, postcolonial theory offers ways of relocating the dynamics of intercultural theatre within identifiable fields of socio-political and historical relations. (44)

It could be said that railroad plays stress a particular kind of historicity, one that acknowledges the ways in which immigrants have contributed to the foundation of both Canada and the United States. While I recognize the differences between "Asian Canadian" and "Asian American" theatre, railroad plays have proven to be a connecting point rather than a point of contention. On both sides of the border, railroad plays have come out of the Asian playmaking community, and with similar characteristics.

With that said, each of the plays examined in this thesis has been produced in Canada, using Canadian talent. For this reason, I consider them Asian Canadian theatre productions. Perhaps more important than simply calling attention to a playwright's nationality is the fact that railroad plays bring critical issues such as immigration and discrimination into the public sphere. As theatre with social justice at its essence, railroad plays champion the "underdog," asking us to be aware of our own complacency with such difficult issues. In his foreword to *Contemporary Asian American Plays*, an anthology edited by Chay Yew, Hwang writes:

Second-wave writers often searched for the holy grail of authenticity. Freeing ourselves from the racist images that mainstream America had imposed on us, we reasoned, would reveal our true selves. But which truth? Battles raged, with authors and scholars accusing each other of "reinforcing stereotypes" and writing "fake" stories.... Third-wave writers have largely abandoned the quest for the holy grail of authenticity, since Asian America is neither monolithic nor uniform.

No single writer can represent an entire culture: only a community of writers can do that. (Hwang xi-xii)

It seems as if the second and third-wave (otherwise known as first or second generation) playwrights still carry a heavy responsibility, while third-wave playwrights may now deal with a range of issues in a manner that suits their taste. These differences are confirmed by the three plays that I have examined in this thesis. Marty Chan and David Henry Hwang are second-wave playwrights that are closer, at least in years, to the discrimination faced by Chinese pioneers. Chan deals with the topic of immigration and adaptation through a mythic Chinese folk-hero, Monkey King. The story is one that reiterates the importance of family, sacrifice and the search for a better life. Hwang deals with the topic of social injustice on the railroad and brings the strike into view in order to suggest that his protagonists have agency and courage. David Yee is definitely part of the third-wave generation. Born and raised in Toronto, he has a contemporary perspective that is reflective yet forward-looking. Yee gives prominence to a family of "hybrids." As characters in the play, Max Lochran, Danny and Sylvia must revisit their familial past in order to realize how interconnected they are to each other. Yee uses a film noir genre to contain the extreme violence and cultural clashing that takes place in his play. He breaks from a typical chronology by using flashbacks and surreal dreamscapes in the hospital, and both are useful in creating an environment of suspense and unexpectedness.

Whether Asian North American playwrights are first, second or third generation, many seem to be drawn to the railroad as a site of exploration and contention. Given the relationship of Chinese laborers to the construction of the CPR (Canada) and Central Railroad (USA), it is no surprise that the protagonists written in railroad plays must navigate between two nations or homelands: that of their birthplace and the place to

which they have emigrated. In doing so they are faced with the challenges of how best to integrate and contribute to their adopted homeland in a context of widespread, state-sanctioned discrimination. Railroad plays allow artists of Asian descent to tell their individual stories while simultaneously challenging any kind of monolithic cultural history.

As we have seen, the plays I have discussed are not homogenous in content or style. *The Forbidden Phoenix* carefully integrates sounds from eastern and western musical traditions in order to create a fable that is appealing to all ages. Marty Chan takes the mythical Monkey King character out of his traditional context, and in doing so, allows Chinese readers and audiences to see this familiar archetype. In Chan's dramatic version, the Monkey King becomes a protagonist that must overcome the forces of evil and greed. He transforms the simian character of Sun Wukong into a railroad worker, thus drawing parallels between the search for knowledge and the search for a better life. *lady in the red dress*, by contrast, takes a contemporary approach that is very vignette-based. Skipping back and forth from 1923 to 2006, David Yee takes his readers and audiences on a more fragmented journey tinged with aspects of film noir. The use of a femme fatale character and the presence of guns and knives add to the dark, almost surreal quality of the play. *The Dance and the Railroad* by David Henry Hwang is the most historical of the three, transporting audiences back in time. As a play set in 1867, the historical context is laid bare in the text. Hwang places the two principal characters on a mountaintop, close to the actual site of a railroad, giving it a real physical presence in the play. Audiences hear about the coolies' struggles, and begin to empathize with both Lone and Ma as they reveal intimate familial stories and the ongoing struggles with their

superiors. The play portrays immigrants as pro-active and self-aware subjects, willing to go on strike for their right to equal pay.

Chan, Yee and Hwang all employ dramatic techniques such as storyline, Chinese language and symbols, genre, characterization and references to social injustices to bring attention to the experiences of Chinese immigrants in North America. By doing so, they engage in what I have referred to as "performing reconciliation," enacting the past in order to better understand the history of strained intercultural relationships and discrimination experienced by Chinese laborers. These plays are important because they provide a space for Asian bodies onstage, struggling, laughing and dreaming for a better life.

Railroad plays are unique in their status and purpose. By "performing reconciliation," the plays engage in social activism by speaking directly to issues such as inequality, redress, human rights, and cultural integration. Railroad plays provoke readers and audience members to revisit history with new eyes. Not unimportantly, they also provide a platform for professional artistic achievement. As a sub-genre of contemporary Asian Canadian theatre, railroad plays contribute not only to Canadian theatre history, but also to a fuller, more nuanced national archive.

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