

Iron Road Study Guide

I - INTRODUCTION

History Repeats Itself



In the summer of 1999, 600 migrants from the Chinese province of Fujien came by rusty fishing boat to Canada in hopes of starting a new life. They were left on a remote beach in the Queen Charlotte Islands in wet weather with only the clothes they were wearing. These migrants were considered illegal aliens. They had paid up to \$40,000 to "snakehead" gangsters to be smuggled to North America. Their arrest and subsequent filing for refugee status provoked a firestorm of reaction from many Canadians that sometimes bordered on the xenophobic.

Many believed these migrants were, at best, economic opportunists and sneaks, if not outright contributors to organized crime. Many politicians took advantage of this public outcry. They saw political advantage in trying to tighten what they perceived as Canada's "loose" immigration laws.

"We shall not accept these low-born criminals from a foreign shore. I say Canadian work should go to Canadian citizens!" Edgar Crow Baker

That previous statement accurately sums up the feelings of many Canadians regarding the recent refugee "crisis". The irony here is that those words were spoken in the House of Commons one hundred and seventeen years ago. It would appear that old political habits die hard.

Turn back the clock now two centuries to another period of migration. In the mid-1800s, thousands of Chinese peasants, merchants, even professionals, left the impoverished province of Guangdong to pursue dreams of prosperity in North America. They were willing to risk everything for a chance to succeed in "Gum San" – literally, Gold Mountain. They had been doing it for centuries. Before immigration to North America, they had gone to South East Asia, Australia and South America.

"Gum San! Gum San! Money tumbles down your hills!"¹

These migrants came to North America with the same desperate hopes as those who did so in 1999. Aboard the ships, conditions were terrible, as they were for most travellers at the time. The three-month journey was short on water, medicines and space. The men slept in locker beds – wooden bunks, 5-6 deep – so close together that they could not sit up.

What caused and still causes these great Chinese migrations? The answer lies in China's cultural and national history of the time...

¹ *Iron Road, Act I, Scene I, Chinese Workers, The Ship*

II - HISTORICAL BACKGROUND – China

The Chinese people have shared a common culture longer than any other group on Earth. The Chinese writing system, for example, dates back almost 4,000 years. The imperial dynastic system of government, which continued for centuries, was established as early as 221 BC. Although many dynasties were overturned, the dynastic system survived.

China was even ruled at times by foreign invaders, such as the Mongols during the Yuan Dynasty and the Manchus during the **Ch'ing Dynasty**, but the foreigners were largely absorbed into the culture they governed.

The Western Powers Arrive

The success of the Ch'ing dynasty in keeping the old order did not help the empire once China was challenged by seafaring Western powers. The centuries of peace and superiority dating back to Ming times did not encourage change in the attitudes of the ruling class. Confucian scholars fully believed in the cultural superiority of Chinese civilization and the position of the empire at the centre of their known universe. To question this, to suggest changes, or to promote foreign ideas was viewed as criminal. Imperial purges dealt severely with those who strayed from tradition.

There was China, and then there was the rest of the world. It wasn't that they rejected the idea of a community of nations; it's that they couldn't imagine it. It would be like trying to teach a Buddhist monk about the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Most harmful to the Ch'ing dynasty were the military raids by Western powers that shook the foundations of the empire. After 1860 China was facing a new situation the like of which had not been seen in thousands of years. Foreigners had entered China during an era of imperialism. In the late 1800s Great Britain and other European nations, the United States, Russia, and Japan scrambled for control there. In some cases they seized Chinese territories, but usually they only sought the riches of trade and business. Western imperialism imposed foreign law on local populations and restricted Chinese citizens from working at special concessions. It did, however, bring great technological advantage to the old country.

Trade between China and the West carried on disguised as tribute: foreigners had to follow the complicated, centuries-old rituals imposed on ambassadors from China's smaller states. The imperial court had no idea that the Europeans would expect or deserve to be treated as equals.

19th Century Invasions and Rebellions

China in the 19th century was overwhelmed by internal chaos. It was easy prey to more powerful nations that wanted to exploit every advantage and to profit from trade. The most profitable trade was in the narcotic, opium. The West wanted Chinese silver and found it easy to create a demand for opium, which was introduced by the Portuguese via Goa. The first of many Sino-Western conflicts in the 19th century was the first Opium War, fought from 1839 to 1842. More than a fight over the opium trade in China, it was a contest between China as the representative of ancient Eastern civilization and Britain as the forerunner of the modern West. Free trade advocates in the West had protested against the restrictive trading system in Canton. They demanded free trade in China, the opening of more ports to Westerners, and the establishment of treaty relations.

In 1839 the Chinese government made a concerted effort to suppress the opium trade. All the opium warehouses in the province of Canton were confiscated. This serious effort, followed by a minor military incident, led to hostilities. In February 1840 the British sent an expedition against Canton.

The Treaty of Nanjing, which was signed on Aug. 29, 1842, and a supplemental treaty of Oct. 8, 1843 ended the conflict, in which the more powerful British were victorious. These treaties provided for payment of an indemnity of 21 million dollars by the Chinese, cession of five ports for British trade and residence, and the right of British citizens in China to be tried in British courts. It was at this time that Britain gained control of Hong Kong.

The Taiping Rebellion, 1851- 1864

By the 19th century, China was experiencing growing internal economic pressures. There was no industry or trade big enough to employ a population of over 300 million Chinese. The shortage of land led to widespread rural discontent; a breakdown in law and order. Corrupt government and military systems and mounting urban poverty also contributed to these disturbances. Localized revolts erupted in various parts of the empire in the early nineteenth century.

A number of peasant revolts occurred in the 1840s, coming to a head in the Taiping Rebellion, the biggest rebellion in Chinese history.

During the mid-nineteenth century, China's problems were compounded by natural calamities, including droughts, famines, and floods. Government neglect of public works was in part responsible for this and other disasters, and the Ch'ing administration did little to relieve the misery caused by them. Economic tensions, military defeats at Western hands, and anti-Manchu feeling all combined to produce general unrest, especially in the south. South China had been the last area to yield to the Ch'ing conquerors and the first to be exposed to Western influence. New forces were marshaled and the commanders suppressed the rebels with the help of Western weapons and leadership. They annihilated the Taipings in 1864.

The internal rebellions were suppressed, but external threats continued. After a brief period of "cooperation" in the 1860s, foreign powers renewed their assault on China. Again, China became embroiled in a series of conflicts: the Tianjin Massacre with France in 1870, the Ili crisis with Russia in 1879, the Sino-French War from 1884 to 1885, and the Sino-Japanese War from 1894 to 1895. Each brought further humiliation and injury to the rule of the Chi'ng. In the last two incidents territory was lost, and compensation had to be paid to the winners.

Guangdong Province

*"Beardless Men of China,
From Province of Guangdong!"²*

Guangdong is located in the southern part of China, bordering the South China Sea. It has a land area of 178,000 square kilometres and, at the time *Iron Road* is set, a population of over 10 million. The economy of the 1800s was agrarian. Guangdong's subtropical climate and plentiful rainfall provided favourable conditions for agriculture, including the production of rice, sugar cane and fruit. The Pearl River Delta is one of the richest agricultural areas in China.

The major dialect spoken is Cantonese, but a sizeable minority of the population speaks the Chaozhou dialect. The official language is standard Mandarin (Putonghua).

At the time of our opera, the poor in Guangdong lived miserable lives at the mercy of floods and drought year after year. As farmers, most of them lived close to nature. They were accustomed to nature's beauties but also suffered from disease, famine, and war.

A typical Guangdong village would consist of perhaps one hundred households. Village houses were made of kiln-baked brick and tile roofs. Farmers wore straw sandals or clogs instead of cloth shoes, and broad plaited hats against the severe rain and sun.

² *ibid*, Act I, Scene III, Manli, *The Mountain*

A village of this size would not be large enough to be self-sufficient. Its real community centred on a larger market town within a walking distance of two or three miles; a family member might go there and return on market days. The larger community had an economic base - surplus farm or handicraft products were exchanged for paper, iron implements, ceramic-ware or other imports. But there was also a social foundation. Strict rules of marriage led families to seek brides in other villages, usually through market town matchmakers. Marriage to any kind of foreigner, however, was strictly taboo.

From infancy, a person was trained to observe the proper familial relationships, especially devotion to family. The three bonds (san-kang) of the classical teaching were strict: obeying parents, subordination of wives to husbands, and loyalty of subject to ruler. The order of the nuclear family was only a small part of the kinship network that extended out into lineage and ancestry. Dead ancestors were revered by the living.

The importance of this submitting of individual to family is not easy for us to understand today. The father's authority was absolute and the virtue of obedience in a son or daughter was taken for granted.

Emigrating from Guangdong

For many impoverished southern Chinese, Guangdong province was a port of departure to the rest of the world. Citizens from the south looked overseas in hopes of improving their lives.

The majority of Chinese emigrants were from Guangdong and Fukien; after 1840 they spread throughout South-East Asia, the Pacific, the Caribbean, the islands of the Indian Ocean, Africa, and North America. It is difficult to establish exact figures for this migration, part of which was only temporary. Emigrants would work in other countries sending money back to family, with an understanding that they would eventually return to family in the old country. At the time of our opera, the number of Chinese residing abroad was estimated at two or three million.

III - The Taoist "Genesis"

"In the beginning, there were no material bodies or even any shapes or forms. This state we call "nothingness." Nothingness is the underlying substance of the Tao, the original source of the universe. When the Tao produced the function of creation, the "myriad things" came forth. This state we call "Being." This being is the function of the Tao."

"The underlying substance of the universe is nothingness, from nothing came heaven and earth. From heaven and earth came the myriad things, finally giving rise to the world as we know it."

This precept of "being" and "non-being" is summed up in the familiar Taoist symbol of Yin and Yang – female and male - balance.

Throughout *Iron Road* there are references to Taoist spiritual practice and Chinese Spiritual Thought concepts. These concepts are incorporated into character, plot, and the overall theme of the opera. The origins of the Tao De Jing (the Taoist "bible") are unknown. The earliest manuscript has no title and names no author. Most modern scholars think it is a collection of sayings from an oral tradition, rather than a work of any single individual, and that its traditional author Laozi (or Lao-tzu, literally, "Old Master") may not have been an actual person.



Chi and Ancestral Spirits

The ancient Chinese believed that the universe was made up of *chi*. To them, everything in the world was far more than its biological, bodily being. All was energy, or *chi*, a vital force in the universe that could be used in all parts of life. Chinese medicine, martial arts, and creative arts are all based in the proper raising and directing of *chi*.

Also part of the belief of the ancient Chinese was that when people died, part of them went down into the earth, but their spirits lived on in the Heavens as chi to become One with the universe. All people, alive and dead, then, were thought to be part of the universal energy.

*"Wash, wrap, and dress
Burn incense and bless.
Remember the dead."³*

This allowed the living to be in touch with their ancestors through worship, rituals, and ceremonies. Ancestors could continue to influence life on earth, thereby continuing the interaction. Ancestors were actively involved in the everyday lives of their descendants.

Time was not linear, as we think of it in the West, with a beginning, middle, and an end. Time was an overlapping series of circles, a field of shifting cycles. Death was not an ending but rather a step in the continuum of time, with the potential for higher status as an ancestral spirit. Natural and supernatural forces were also in continuous change, affecting the spiritual and material universe. Boundaries were fluid, elastic, and permeable.

³ *ibid*, Act II, Scene IV, Lai Gwan, *Remember the Dead*

The Five Elements

*"Fire, Wood, Metal, Earth, and Water
Five ancient elements that make up life"*

All that we encounter is made up of five elements that the Chinese believed basic to life: water, wood, metal, earth, and fire. Because they perceived that the entire universe was always shifting, the elements were also always changing through their interactions with one another. Some interactions were complementary, others were competing. For example, wood produces fire, making a complementary pair whereas water puts out fire, making those two elements a contending pair. If we look at the world around us, we can see how the elements shift. We can observe destructive cycles - for example, when water evaporates or wood decomposes. But at the same time, there is a cycle of renewal, during which water condenses and new trees grow. The Chinese believed that things do exist, but that existence is time-limited within the cycles of inevitable change.

Nitro!

*"Climb the rock
Plant the stick
Light the fuse
But best be quick"⁴*

The Chinese are largely credited with the invention of the first explosive "black powder" (what we know today as gunpowder) in the 13th century. It is made of 75% saltpetre, 15% charcoal and 10% sulphur. The Chinese originally used it as a weapon - making bamboo tubes to fire stone bullets at enemy positions.

By the 14th century the powder's formula had spread to many different countries. Initially black powder was used for military purposes. It wasn't until the 17th century that it was used in mining, tunnel, and canal excavation.

In 1858 the manufacture of black powder was refined into a more efficient and safe substance - "blasting powder" which was used only in engineering jobs.

In 1884 smokeless powder products like nitroglycerin were perfected and first put into military use by the French. Nitroglycerin is a very powerful explosive that is still used today. The Italian scientist Ascanio Sobrero first discovered it in 1846. Initially it was used as a headache remedy!

After a time nitroglycerin was considered to be too dangerous for blasting. It was so chemically unstable that many nations refused to allow ships carrying nitroglycerin to dock in their ports. In Canada, nitroglycerin had been in regular use as a railway-building explosive since 1866. The technique was to pour the

⁴ ibid, Act 2, Prologue, Ama, *The Dream*

explosive into holes drilled by hand or with a compressed-air rock drill. In drilling holes for the explosive, it was the practice to fill them first with water and then pour in the heavier liquid; the water then floated to the top and acted as tamping. After the water, the liquid was poured into the holes, each about seven feet deep, and then set off by a fuse.

There was among the workmen an almost cavalier attitude to the explosive. Cans of nitroglycerin with fuses attached were strewn carelessly along the roadbed, breaking all safety regulations, or were carried about with such recklessness that the fluid splashed upon the rocks. Whole gangs were sometimes blown to bits in the resultant explosions, especially in the cold weather, because the chemical was notoriously dangerous when frozen; the slightest jar could touch it off. Nitroglycerin could not be transported by wagon; the jarring along those corrugated trails would have made short work of the first driver foolish enough to risk it. It had to be carried in ten-gallon tins on men's backs. The number of men killed or maimed by accidental explosions was truly staggering. In one stretch of section in the interior of British Columbia, Sandford Fleming counted thirty graves, all the result of the careless handling of nitroglycerine.

Alfred Nobel, the Swedish inventor after whom the Nobel Prize is named, lost a brother to a nitroglycerin explosion during experimental tests. Nobel was forced to move his laboratory to a barge anchored out in the middle of a lake. Nobel refused to abandon his labours, however, and in 1866 he was rewarded by the invention of dynamite. Today, this is the most common of the high explosives, for the first time enabling man to blast away great masses of rock and other obstacles with comparative safety.



Ordinary dynamite is usually made in sticks from 1 to 2 inches (2.5 to 5 centimetres) in diameter and about 8 inches (20 centimetres) long. These consist of brown paper wrappers coated with wax to keep out moisture. If a small quantity is set on fire free from pressure or vibration of any kind, it will burn; but, if the least blow strikes it while burning, it will explode with great violence. Dynamite is usually set off with a detonator, or blasting cap.

IV - CANADIAN HISTORY – The Canadian Pacific Railway

"I have caused a charter to be granted to a body of Canadian capitalists for the construction of the Pacific Railway."

Thus Sir John A. Macdonald opened the first session of the Second Parliament of Canada, March 6, 1873. It was a bold promise, and one that would not be achieved without great political struggle and backbreaking human effort.

During the parliamentary session of 1871 the government of Sir John MacDonald decided that the Iron Road should be built, not by the state, but by a private company known as "The Syndicate." The new company would be aided by liberal subsidies in cash and in land, and, to meet British Columbia's terms, it would be begun within two, and completed within ten years. Introduced into parliament on 9 December 1880, the Railway Bill became law on 15 February 1881, and the Canadian Pacific Railway charter was issued on the following day. The Railway Syndicate put down a \$1 million cheque as security, and the new company held its first meeting on February 17th, 1881.

The construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway opened up the western provinces to settlement and industry. It was hoped that the new line would serve many purposes and solve many problems. Primarily, the CPR was a concrete symbol of national unity - an iron band from east to west that joined all of British North America and protected the country from American influence. Years before Confederation, the concept of "one Canada from Sea to Sea" was nothing but a dream. The CPR would ensure that this impossible dream became a reality.

However, the actual creation and completion of the CPR was far from a sure thing. After several stumbling financial mistakes, market misfortunes and plain bad judgement, the CPR was saved - not by any financial or political bailouts, but by Louis Riel.

The Riel Rebellions

On March 26, 1885, a second Metis uprising led by Riel, the Northwest Rebellion, gave the CPR's new boss, William Cornelius Van Horne, at long last, the chance to demonstrate the CPR's value to Canada. Until then the public and politicians had seen the enterprise as little more than a massive and unending drain on the Treasury. Fifteen years earlier, General Wolseley's army had slogged through bush, rock and muskeg for three months to reach Winnipeg from Montreal in order to crush the first Riel Rebellion.

In March 1885 the rebels cut the telegraph wires at Batoche, their headquarters south of Prince Albert. A force of Mounties and militia sent to put down the rebellion suffered a defeat by the rebels at Duck Lake. The Indians attacked a mission and forced the Mounties to abandon Fort Pitt.

The federal government did not have enough troops in the West to put down the rebellion. The Mounties formed a thin red line across the prairies, and a handful of them had to contain a strike in the Rockies on 1 April 1885.

But Canada did have a railway line to the west.

In April 1885, Van Horne dedicated every resource of the CPR to the astonishing transportation feat of hauling nearly 3,000 troops over the still uncompleted line. Troops marched or sleighed over the 89-mile gap in the line, travelling on flatcars where no coaches were available before speeding across the prairies. The first contingent reached Winnipeg in only seven days. The soldiers were chilled to the marrow, but they'd arrived months earlier than Riel had expected, and the revolt was crushed by May 14th. Riel had overlooked the telegraph and the railway and the speed with which they could carry news of the outbreak to the East and bring troops to the West to control it. The CPR saved itself by saving the West.

The victorious soldiers returned home all the way by rail, singing the praises of the CPR. Publicity was certainly not Van Horne's chief motive when he offered the services of the railway, but he realized fully the value of so dramatic a demonstration of its usefulness. On 16 November 1885, nine days after the last spike was driven in the Rockies, Louis Riel died on the gallows in Regina. Van Horne claimed that, "in simple gratitude, the Company ought to erect a monument to Riel as its greatest benefactor."

Linking British Columbia

The decisive political factor came into play in 1870, when British Columbia entered the federation. The CPR was intended as a railway link to the newly minted province of British Columbia. Macdonald dangled this carrot in hopes that the new province would join in Confederation. To British Columbians, the CPR was not only a rail link but also a way of opening up the new province to settlement and expanding its tiny population of 35,000. Towns would spring up over night on the new line as construction wound its way through the interior to the Pacific Ocean.

The final reason for the CPR's creation was international rivalry. In the United States, the Central Pacific Railway and the Union Pacific Railway had joined track near Ogden in Utah in 1869. In 1871 the Southern Pacific and the Texas Pacific fought for subsidies and market share, and the proposed Northern Pacific Railway threatened the Canadian transportation market. The young Dominion of Canada was stirred by ambition and fear to imitate its powerful neighbour to the south.

All of these factors, then, brought the question of a railway to the Pacific on Canadian soil within the range of practical politics. But important questions still remained to be settled.

East Meets West on the CPR

*"Nine hundred miles straight west we'll go
Clear cross the prairies to the river called Bow"⁵*

Once under full construction, the CPR pushed rapidly westward, but halted before the Pacific. The Rocky Mountains stopped the work crews dead in their tracks. The engineering challenges of the Canadian Shield were very small compared to the jagged, towering peaks of "The Great Divide" and add to that the problem of finding good, cheap labour to attempt this impossible task.

In 1880, the white population of British Columbia was estimated at about 35,000, most engaging in gold mining, coal mining, fishing or commerce. It was estimated that no more than 400 white men were available for employment on the railway. Another workforce needed to be found quickly to fill this gap. The Federal government wanted to use Chinese labour because they worked cheap and were not expected to stay in Canada after the completion of the railroad.

*"One dollar a day!
One dollar a day!
Sure beats farming for no pay!"⁶*

⁵ *ibid*, Act I, Scene II, White Workers, *The Iron Road*

⁶ *ibid*, Act I, Scene III, Chinese Workers, *The Mountain*

Meanwhile in China, between 1850 and 1875 foreign agents and navigation companies used dishonest and often-violent means to recruit 1,280,000 "contracted" workers, who in fact were slaves and were used to supply manpower around the globe. These unfortunate people – "Coolies" – packed together in warehouses and cargo ships, undernourished and cheated out of their promised meagre wages from the start, had a mortality rate from disease and suicide as high as 50 to 60 percent. The "snakeheads" of the 1800s saw these poor workers as a product to be taken advantage of. From the workers' point of view, there was the opportunity to earn a living that could not be achieved in the homeland. From the Chinese government's perspective, workers earning overseas wages sent valuable foreign currency home to family. Emigration also eased the effects of overpopulation in the old country. To the rest of the world, these poor Chinese labourers were a very cheap and efficient workforce that could perform the difficult and dangerous tasks that local workers refused to do.

Although no Chinese came to North America under the Coolie System, it is easy to see the parallels between it and the credit-ticket system.

White workers earned \$1.50 to \$1.75 per day while the Chinese were offered \$1 a day. Government contractors needed 10,000 men but found it difficult to recruit good white labourers. The North Pacific and South Pacific Railways in the United States paid much better. British Columbia was a province that needed to be filled. And yet, the Chinese were not welcome as settlers. They found themselves in a "double-bind." They were needed but not wanted. White reaction to these upstart foreigners was, of course, spiteful.

*No more for you, Chinaman
Home you go, Chinaman
Back across the sea.
You've bled us dry
It's time to say goodbye!⁷*

It was an early case of "Not In My Back Yard", fuelled partly by racism and partly by concerns about lowering white wages. White British Columbians opposed the use of the Chinese because they worked for less and would degrade the livelihood of white labourers; they were also considered a "false economy" - migrants who would not settle in the province but return home with Canadian dollars in their pockets.

"We have a lot of people who want to come and a big industry here who feed off them. The government listens to the industry; it doesn't listen to the citizens who say, 'No more immigrant workers!'"

⁷ *ibid*, Act II, Scene III , *The Last Spike*

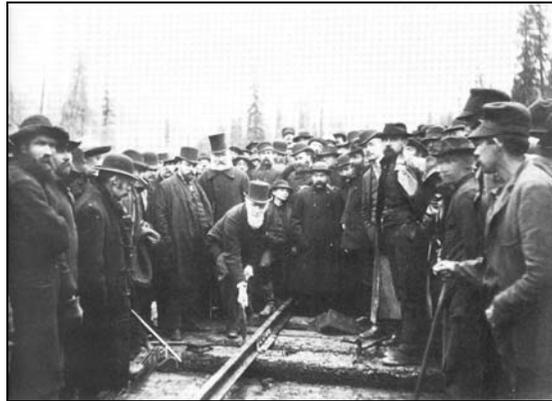
Eventually the government was faced with a difficult political decision. Many considered using the Chinese workers an "evil". But the CPR could not be completed without them. The prospect of no railway at all would be much worse. So, the Prime Minister warned the politicians of British Columbia that if they wanted to have the railway complete and to be part of the new, expanding Canada, they should tolerate the employment of the Chinese in railway construction through the Rockies.

The Onderdonk Section – 1879

A competent American engineer, Andrew Onderdonk, signed a \$9.1 million contract to build track between Yale and Kamloops, British Columbia. From there the line would head northeast through the Yellowhead Pass and slice across the prairies along the route surveyed by Sandford Fleming. In all, the transcontinental line would stretch for 2600 miles between Callander and Port Moody and the CPR would have built 1900 miles of this.

Onderdonk was given the task of completing an immensely difficult 127 miles of track in the interior of British Columbia. Under the government contract, he used a mixed force of Chinese (many of them experienced railway workers from California), Americans and Canadians to carve the line through the coastal mountains. From Yale the line followed the Fraser River, crossed it, and then headed inland along the Thompson River. Onderdonk used the Caribou Road to supply the line, and took his sternwheeler "Skuzzy" through Hell's Gate for use on the Upper Fraser and Thompson. One hundred and fifty of "Onderdonk's Lambs" (the Chinese workers) hauled the vessel upriver against the current. Some of the Chinese had been employed in railroad construction in the United States, and came to Canada from there and in batches from China as contract labourers. Earning a pittance, living on rice and salmon, they dreamed of a return home or of a new life in "Gum San" - the Golden Mountain. The Chinese did most of the heavy rock work, while the whites did the easier timber work, cutting trees and building trestles. The workers carved fifteen tunnels along the lower Fraser. In February 1882 Onderdonk turned his crews around and began the line between Yale and Port Moody at tidewater. The last spike on this section was driven on 22 January 1884.

The Last Spike – 1885



"Strike the spike, Donald Smith!"⁸

The famous "last spike" was driven on the 7th of November 1885 at Craigellachie in the interior of British Columbia. The excitement and the enthusiasm of construction and the sheer, hard, backbreaking work and worry that had gone into it, had become part of Canada's history and image.

That image is summed up in Canada's most famous photograph. In it Donald Smith taps the spike home at 9:22 a.m. Pacific Time. Sandford Fleming, with a square white beard, stares into the camera. He had invented Standard Time after missing a train in Ireland, and this method of marking the hours would prove invaluable in running the railway. Cornelius Van Horne, hands in pocket, stomach well out front, looks on benignly. The last spike, he said, would be "just as good an iron one as there is between Montreal and Vancouver and anyone who wants to see it driven will have to pay full fare.

Smith bent the spike on the first try but eventually succeeded in banging it into place. After it was driven, the cry went up: "All aboard for the Pacific!" All the tycoons and politicians hopped onboard and rode from Kamloops to the sea in Onderdonk's private car.

The Exclusion Acts

But where were the Chinese workers at the hammering of the last spike? Those who contributed the most don't even appear in the picture. Some who could afford it had already gone home to Guangdong. Those who couldn't afford the return fare of \$20 dollars scattered "like rice" across the country looking for work.

They were met with hatred and fear wherever they tried to settle. Both the American and Canadian government set up anti-Chinese "exclusion acts." These prevented the unemployed railway workers from finding suitable work elsewhere.

⁸ *ibid*, Act II, Scene IV, Moguls, *The Last Spike*

An incredible foreword to British Columbia's Chinese Regulation Act, enacted in 1884, shows the growing feeling against the Chinese as the Onderdonk contracts neared completion. The Chinese, it says, "are not disposed to be governed by our laws; are dissimilar in habits and occupation from our people, evade the payment of taxes justly due to the Government; are governed by pestilential habits; are useless in instances of emergency; habitually desecrate graveyards by the removal of bodies therefrom and are inclined to habits subversive of the comfort and well being of the community..."

The act was eventually struck down but other bigoted laws followed until, by 1904, the head tax imposed on incoming Chinese had risen to a prohibitive five hundred dollars.

The railway workers who remained left few descendants (since they brought no women with them) and few, if any, memories. Some, however, returned to Guangdong and then came back to Canada with their families to settle permanently in British Columbia. Much of their story is now lost in the mists of history - how they were hired, where they worked, how they lived, what they felt about the strange, new land that was to become their home. Such details were not set down and so are lost forever - like the crumbling bones that lie in unmarked graves beneath the rock and the rubble high above the Fraser River's angry torrent.

*"Smashed Chinese dead
Stacked in a pile
Their bones line the way
Of each iron mile"⁹*

Recognition was slow in coming for the sacrifice and contribution of the Chinese railway workers. It was not until the early 1980's that a bronze plaque honouring their hard work was dedicated in Yale, British Columbia.



The plaque reads as follows:

⁹ *ibid*, Act II, Scene IV, *Remember the Dead*

CHINESE CONSTRUCTION WORKERS ON THE PACIFIC RAILWAY

In the early 1880's contractor Andrew Onderdonk brought thousands of labourers from China to help build the Pacific Railway through the mountains of British Columbia. About three-quarters of the men who worked on the section between the Pacific and Craigellachie were Chinese.

Although considered excellent workers, they received only a dollar a day, half the pay of a white worker. Hundreds of Chinese died from accidents or illness, for the work was dangerous and living conditions poor. Those who remained in Canada when the railway was completed securely established the basis of British Columbia's Chinese community.

V - FROM SPARK TO STAGE

Composer Chan Ka Nin's Inspiration:

In 1991, Hong Kong born composer Chan Ka Nin began researching Chinese Canadian history. Several photographs caught his eye, among them the famous picture taken at Craigellachie on November 7, 1885, of the "last spike" of the CPR being driven in by Donald Smith. Some time later, he read a Victoria newspaper story from the 1860s that told of a group of Chinese passengers arriving by a Norwegian ship in British Columbia. Among the 265 migrants was one young woman. This fact excited professor Chan because he had been told that no Chinese women had been allowed on Canadian soil in the 1800s and he had already begun to formulate a tragic love story around such a protagonist. Who was the sole woman? And how did she get to Victoria alone? In Professor Chan's mind, the love story, the historical words and the poignant images began to form the outline of an opera - a story set against the building of the CPR that would bridge his people's history in Canada.



Traditional Chinese
Ceremonial
Wedding Dress

The Collaborative Process – Playwright & Librettist Mark Brownell Writes:

Opera is perhaps the most "collaborative" of all the performing arts. The creation of new opera requires a series of very different and difficult collaborations. The first is the collaboration between composer and librettist. In opera history, this has sometimes been a stormy relationship. Stories abound of angry composers writing nasty letters about the calibre of the libretto to equally angry librettists who in turn write back more nasty letters about the quality of the music and questioning the composer's sanity. There are natural differences between the composer and the writer's visions. If they cannot be mended, creative clashes can lead to big problems on stage and off. But when it works...ah, it works wonderfully. Then this collaborative process creates something special and unique only to opera - something that can rarely be matched by any of the other performing arts because opera encompasses and compliments them all - dance, music, poetry, and theatre.

Once upon a time, in early opera, the libretto ruled the creative process. Early operas were often set to famous poems and often the libretto of those early times is the only thing that has been passed down to us. Emphasis was given to the words, the story; the music was considered as enhancement to those words. Ironically, over the centuries, this trend reversed itself and the music of opera took a front seat to the libretto. Suddenly, it was possible to have a stunningly beautiful and successful piece of music that had a less than beautiful story and words. As long as those words ended in a nice round-sounding "O" that was easy for the singer to deliver, everything was fine. At the dawn of the 21st Century, opera has moved into a more agreeable balance between music and text. Much more attention is now paid to story line and lyric and the music is more important than ever to achieve artistic success.

People often ask creative teams, "Do you write the music or the words first?" It's often difficult to give a straight answer to this - a "very chicken or the egg" discussion. What is definitely needed first is a story idea, which in turn, gets expanded into a story outline with the help of a dramaturg. That story outline contains a structural "arc" - a dramatic beginning, middle, and ending - that can follow established dramatic rules (Introduction, Development, Climax, Falling Action, and Resolution) or break those rules all together.

From the story outline the team sets out to create the libretto (the words of the opera). This next step of the collaborative process is where things get a little cloudy.

The words may come first, and often do, but a scene from the story outline may suggest some musical motif to the composer, who will compose it and then have the words filled in by the librettist. Librettist and composer may sit side by side at the piano - or they may swap e-mails from thousands of miles away.

In *Iron Road* there is a further step of collaboration. All of the Chinese text is spoken in Cantonese dialect – about one third of the opera. The original English was translated into Cantonese and then fit into the music, or in some cases the music was composed specifically for the Cantonese sounds and inflection. *Iron Road* is unique in this collaboration. I believe that *Iron Road* is the first opera to contain two separate languages operating simultaneously.

<p>Artistic Director Wayne Strongman notes: "We hope to have no changes once staging rehearsals begin on March 19, 2001!"</p>
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As the collaborative process continues, there must also be room for cuts and revisions. Additional lyrics might be needed to fill out a musical phrase or enhance the narrative. Or lines may need to be cut altogether. Time also plays a large factor in the completion of an opera. Often words will be changed or cut right up until opening night. In opera, there is never enough time to achieve full completion or satisfaction.

After the collaboration of composer and librettist comes the collaboration of musical director (conductor) and composer. The work must be interpreted by orchestra and singers to the satisfaction of both of these collaborators. Then there is the often turbulent collaboration between the musical and stage director. The conductor guides the musical expression of the singer and of the orchestra. The stage director blocks the story and provides acting advice to the performers. These musical and theatrical needs are often in conflict. But it is that very same conflict that provides a wonderful and energetic synergy when the opera finally opens. "Without conflict, theatre does not exist."

The Making of an Opera

Iron Road had its genesis in a partnership that began 10 years ago, when composer Chan Ka Nin approached David Jaeger of CBC Radio with an outline of a fictional story - an idea he had about the Chinese railway workers on the CPR. Jaeger found the idea intriguing, arranged for the CBC to commission the work and suggested that Ka Nin go to Tapestry Music Theatre for help in developing it. It was a good creative match for the two. Tapestry was looking to produce a major new Canadian opera and Ka Nin wanted to try experimenting with the operatic convention and to expand on the musical ideas expressed in his orchestral piece *Fantastic Journey* which was commissioned by the Calgary Philharmonic.

In 1999, after several years of story, music and personnel changes, including Mark Brownell coming on board in 1995, all of the key creative elements fell into place. Tom Diamond would direct; Tapestry's Wayne Strongman would conduct; and Claire Hopkinson produce. All worked very hard to bring Ka Nin's original vision to the stage.

To begin creating *Iron Road*, the librettist gathered various historical source materials and began researching. Director and librettist then went away to create and re-work the libretto from an established story outline. A final draft of the libretto was then handed over to Ka Nin who composed and tested the new scenes during several exploratory workshops. For lyrical authenticity, Cantonese Translator George K. Wong was brought on board to translate the language of the Chinese roles into the authentic Cantonese dialect.

Very few Canadian companies have experience in producing new opera, but Tapestry is fortunate to have Claire Hopkinson as its Producer and General Manager. It takes an enormous amount of energy and commitment to develop contacts, engage in community outreach, plan committee meetings, galas and other special events and to juggle all of the myriad tasks required to raise over a million dollars for a production like *Iron Road*. Claire is also dedicated to giving this and other Tapestry productions a life beyond the premiere. That means connecting to potential co-producers, sponsors and festivals across Canada and around the world. Much has been done to lay the track for an touring production of *Iron Road*.

Cultural Fusion: A Western Opera with Eastern Influences

The opera *Iron Road* contains a rich mixture of Eastern and Western musical styles and influences. Much of Chan Ka Nin's music is derived from traditional Cantonese Opera and folk songs. As well, there is a western influence of the period reflected in CPR drinking songs and the music hall melodrama of the time. The Cantonese and English languages are both used in the piece to ensure authenticity. The simultaneous use of both languages makes *Iron Road* a unique operatic experience.

Although *Iron Road* is structured around the plight of the Chinese railway workers, the story delves deeply into Chinese culture and mores. There is a central underlying theme of family, reconciliation, love, and spiritual fulfillment. Central to the theme is the traditional Chinese family of a century ago - conservative, wary of foreign influence, self-contained, and stable. Thrown into that mix is the concept of the "New World" vs. the "Old World". The New World represented by North America in the 1800s is a place where old family values don't often work. What happens to the traditional family when old ideas and attitudes are challenged or changed altogether? How can harmony between old and new ways be re-established?

Also, each character in the *Iron Road* represents a corresponding "element" in the ancient Chinese philosophy of the Tao. Characters interact with each other in the same way that the Taoist elements (fire, water, earth, wood, metal) react and interact - sometimes in harmony and sometimes in conflict. For example, the character of Manli is represented by "fire" and his daughter, Lai Gwan, is represented by "water". (We all know what happens when the two of those meet.)

VI - Characters and Scene-by-Scene Synopsis - *Iron Road*

Central Characters:

LAI GWAN - a young woman
 AMA - her mother
 NICHOL - a railway man
 MANLI - A broker of Chinese workers (and LAI GWAN's father.)

Group Voices:

Chinese CHORUS
 White WORKERS

Minor Characters:

SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD
 DONALD SMITH
 AH LUM and AH CHARN (two poor Chinese workers)
 COOK
 HERDER(s)

ACT 1:

Prologue – The Old World

Time: late 1800's. Place: a small village hut in the province of Guangdong.

Ama lies on her deathbed surrounded by the women of her village; they stand vigil as Ama's daughter Lai Gwan enters with a bowl of water. Lai Gwan strokes Ama's brow with a cool rag.

Ama reminisces about the old days with her husband Manli. Manli left the family years before to seek his fortune in North America and they haven't heard from him for many years. But Ama still has faith that Manli will return and the family will be reunited.

Ama gives Lai Gwan her wedding gown as a last gift. As she dies, Ama blesses Lai Gwan and tells her to make the journey to the New World to find her father. She cautions Lai Gwan to remember family and tradition.

Act 1, Scene 1 - The Ship

Day breaks on the deck of a merchant steamer bound for British Columbia. A rough sea buffets the migrant Chinese workers. Among the group is Lai Gwan disguised as a young man. (Women were not allowed to make the journey to North America.) Lai Gwan is drawn into a fight with a shipmate but before the fight can continue, the coastline of British Columbia is sighted. There is a great cheer from the Chorus as they finally see Gum San - The Golden Mountain.

Act 1, Scene 2 - The Iron Road

In Ottawa, Canadian politicians and moguls toast the launch of the Canadian Pacific Railroad. We are introduced to Nichol and workers as they push their way across the country. Eventually, the impenetrable Rocky Mountains block their way. Manli (who is known only as "Bookman" at this point) comes to their rescue. He will supply the cheap Chinese labour that will allow Nichol to conquer "The Great Divide."

Act 1, Scene 3 - The Mountain

With a magician's flourish, Manli shifts the scene to the Mountain. The Chinese workers (including Lai Gwan) are lead in; Manli divides them into work parties. Lai Gwan challenges the Bookman right from the start. He, in turn, seeks revenge by assigning Lai Gwan to the most dangerous work in the camp – planting dynamite on the mountain face while suspended in a basket. Nichol enters as Lai Gwan scales the rock-face to plant the dynamite. After an explosion, Lai Gwan emerges unhurt from the rubble. The crowd cheers and carries Lai Gwan triumphantly to Nichol. Nichol raises Lai Gwan's hand in triumph. Manli broods jealously in the background.

Act 1, Scene 4 – The Stream

Away from the crowd, Lai Gwan washes herself secretly by a stream. She takes out her mother's wedding dress and holds it fondly. Nichol enters and discovers that she is a woman. Lai Gwan begs him not to tell anyone. She would be an outcast. Manli enters abruptly. Embarrassed, Lai Gwan and Nichol separate. A suspicious Manli drags Lai Gwan away leaving Nichol alone to decide whether he should help her or not.

Act 1, Scene 5 - The Camp

The next day, a sombre procession as the dead body of another worker is carried into camp. Lai Gwan leads the procession. Nichol and Manli watch silently in the background. The mourners cast disgruntled looks at Nichol as they pass by. Manli explains that the workers blame him for the death – and for the damnation of the worker's spirit. Nichol resolves to help Lai Gwan in any way that he can. Manli and Nichol exit.

The body is carried off stage and the Chorus gathers around a fire where they sing a nostalgic folk-song. The song stirs up homesickness. They complain about the poor conditions of the camp and start talking rebellion. They ask for Lai Gwan's opinion. She tells them to protest peacefully rather than resort to violence. The workers bang on pots and pans and call for a strike. The white herders rush in and brutally quell the protest.

Manli enters and blames the protest on Lai Gwan; he tells the herders to hang her for her rebellion. At the last second, Manli tells Lai Gwan his real name and Nichol arrives just in time to stop the lynching. Lai Gwan reveals to everyone that she is the daughter of Manli. [Curtain]

ACT 2:

Prologue – The Dream

Lai Gwan dreams. The voices of Ama, Nichol, Manli and Chorus mingle in her dream state.

Act 2, Scene 1 - Outside the Tunnel

Lai Gwan awakens from her dream. It's dawn; she sits alone - banished from the camp. Manli charges in and they argue. He blames her for everything. The fight continues fiercely until Lai Gwan reveals that Ama is dead. Crushed by this news and wracked with guilt of his abandonment, Manli grabs the "short straw" from a pair of workers and heads into the tunnel with a dynamite charge.

Nichol returns to Lai Gwan. The bond is strengthened and their love blossoms, but before it can get any further a worker rushes in and tells what has happened to Manli. Lai Gwan rushes into the tunnel mouth. Nichol follows her. An explosion - the tunnel mouth collapses.

Act 2, Scene 2 - The Cave

Lai Gwan comforts an injured Nichol. They profess their love and kiss. As Nichol sings a love song to Lai Gwan, Ama's spirit returns to warn her of the dangers of loving a white man. Lai Gwan rejects Ama's call to abandon her love. The sound of pick-axes signals Lai Gwan's rescue. She tries to wake Nichol, but he is dead. Workers rush in and discover that Manli is still alive in the rubble.

Act 2, Scene 3 - The Iron Dragon

With work complete, the Chinese workers hear an ominous sound in the distance. The first train pushes its way through the mountains towards Eagle Pass. There will soon be no more work for them.

Act 2, Scene 4 - The Last Spike

Moguls celebrate at Eagle Pass. Donald Smith delivers the final blow - but misses. The Chinese workers laugh. He pushes them "out of the picture". A herder announces that the Chinese are no longer needed. Manli and Lai Gwan discuss their future. The Chinese chorus laments.

The poorest will be scattered like rice across the country. There is no one left to gather the bones of the dead. Lai Gwan steps forward and says that she will perform the sacred rights of burial.

Act 2, Scene 5 - Remember the Dead

As Lai Gwan and Manli sanctify the bones, they summon the dead and release them from limbo. The dead bless her and grant her the ability to live the rest of her life in peace, reconciled with her father.

VII - Bibliography and Resources

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VIII - Matching The Ontario Curriculum

Canadian and World Studies

Geography - Grade 11

The Americas: Geographic Patterns and Issues, CGD3M

Physical Geography: Patterns, Processes, and Interactions, CGF3M

Regional Geography: Travel and Tourism, CGT3E

Geography - Grade 12

Canadian and World Issues: A Geographic Analysis, CGW4U

World Geography: Human Patterns and Interactions, CGU4U

Geomatics: Geotechnologies in Action, CGO4M

World Geography: Urban Patterns and Interactions, CGU4C

History - Grade 11

World History to the 16th Century, CHW3M

History - Grade 12

Canada: History, Identity, and Culture, CHI4U

World History: The West and the World, CHY4U

Adventures in World History, CHM4E

Politics - Grade 11

Canadian Politics and Citizenship, CPC3O

Politics - Grade 12

Canadian and World Politics, CPW4U

History – Grades 7 & 8

Canadian History

Language Arts - Grades 7 & 8

Social Studies – Grade 8