

Filling in the gaps in Chinese-Canadian history

by FLORENCE HWANG

Putting ink to an almost ignored part of 19th Century China, author Paul Yee's latest novel, *A Superior Man*, tries to imagine the lives and mindsets of peasants trying to survive chaotic times. Yee launches his latest book in the Alice MacKay Room, at the Vancouver Public Library's Central Branch (Oct. 14, 6:30–8:30 p.m.). The event is hosted by the Chinese Canadian Historical Society of B.C.

"I felt this era had been neglected in Chinese-Canadian writing. Our well-known writers – Denise Chong, Wayson Choy, Judy Fong Bates, and Sky Lee – all focus on later periods: the 1920s to 1980s," says Yee, who grew up in Vancouver's Chinatown.

He points out that these authors also write about Chinese-Canadian families. Yet, during early Chinese immigration, men had to leave their wives and children at home in China.

"The all-male communities here were our pioneer settlements. Those men-only dynamics gave rise to stories that are different from family tales," says Yee.

Native narrative

Yee included Native ancestry as part of his novel's narrative because he saw these two groups

is a silvery belt that ties the nation together, from east to west, from sea to sea.

"But we also need to acknowledge the dark side of the railroad: it was the primary device that transported settlers to the prairies and to B.C. Their settlement then devastated many First Nations of Canada," says Yee.

Yee adds that it is imperative to address issues arising from that past.

"Yes, Chinese Canadians are keen to honour the Chinese coolies who helped build the railroad, but that achievement is intertwined with First Nations displacement," he says.

When he was working in the City of Vancouver Archives, he noticed the historical record for the Chinese-Canadian past was full of gaps.

"Our sense of bygone times is incomplete if we rely only on archival materials. Writing historical fiction lets me address some of those gaps by filling them with real and complex people from the past," says Yee. "Why look to the past? Because it can change the way we view the present."

Influences

Yee started his fiction writing career by working on books for younger audiences: picture books, juvenile novels and young adult fiction. In writing for youth audiences, the key elements were



Photo by Mohamed Khaki

▲ Author Paul Yee with railway spikes.

were viewed as outsiders by mainstream Canada. Both were in the bottom rungs of society, so he feels their histories have not been told.

"*A Superior Man* tries to shed some light on both these groups. I wanted to write about them through events not chiefly featuring White people, that is, I didn't put the main focus on tensions between Chinese and White people, or between First Nations and White people," says Yee.

He says was more curious about relations between Chinese and First Nations, and Chinese and Chinese.

"The long history of Chinese-First Nations mixed-blood children in B.C. reaches back to the 1860s, and is only recently getting recognition from scholars and artists," he says.

Yee thinks Canadians like to view the railroad in grand, romantic terms: where the railroad

a compelling plot and strong characters.

"When I go to read other fiction, I tend to like similar elements: strong storylines and interesting personalities. *A Superior Man* can be seen as an old-fashioned novel with its emphasis on character and a straight-forward plot," says Yee.

Another influence in writing this novel was that Yee had just finished writing a play, *Jade in the Coal*, over a three-year period. During that process, he learned to ask "What is his/her journey?" of every character, not just the leading players.

In the future, Yee would like to explore Chinese miners in B.C.'s gold rushes, Chinese salmon cannery workers and young Canadian-born Chinese who are taken or sent to pre-1949 China, where they are "fish out of water." ✍

For more information about Yee, visit his website www.paulyee.ca.



A day of magic for Girls & their Champions!

G Day Vancouver takes place on Friday October 23rd, 2015 at the Creekside Community Recreation Centre in Vancouver, BC. The day-long event - the third to take place to date in Vancouver - is expected to draw up to 150 girls aged 10-12 and 100 adult Champions in a modern day rite of passage, celebrating and empowering girls as they transition from childhood into adolescence.

Speakers include Global TV's Sonia Sunger, City Councillor Andrea Reimer, two-time Olympic Snowboarder Alexa Loo, Clinical Therapist and Mental Health Expert Michele Kambolis, and THEGROOVE Master Trainer Liz Zdunich. Teacher, writer, and storyteller Comfort Ero can speak French. See the full list of presenters here.

G Day Toronto launched in April 2015, and the sold-out G Day Victoria took place on September 20. The two Vancouver events in 2014 were attended by over 500 people.

Event details:

Friday, October 23, 9:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Creekside Community Centre, 1 Athletes Way, Vancouver BC V5Y 0B1

Info and tickets: www.gdayforgirls.com

Tickets \$75 for girls and adult champions

Social media:

Facebook: [Facebook.com/gdayforgirls](https://www.facebook.com/gdayforgirls)

Twitter and Instagram @gdayforgirls

YouTube: [YouTube.com/gdayforgirls](https://www.youtube.com/gdayforgirls)

#GDayforGirls

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