

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

BAN SEND HOE, *Enduring Hardship: The Chinese Laundry in Canada*. Gatineau, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization. 2003, i + 86 p.

Despite the fact that Chinese have been in North America for over one-and-half century, studies on the Chinese still tend to see these communities as an immigrant population, often focussing on how they settle and integrate in the new countries. In recent years, more and more scholars on this continent have started to re-examine and present the voices of people of Chinese descent, a neglected in the history of Canada and United States. By re-telling the tales, we are able to grasp a fresh look of how these two nations have been built, and why certain imageries of the Chinese in North America were constructed in particular historical moments. In this sense, *Enduring Hardship* is certainly a piece of illuminating work that we have needed for a long time to understand a forgotten part of Canadian history.

For a long time, the populations of Chinese communities in North America have been viewed by outsiders as docile, apolitical, and uncommunicative. Their isolation is assumed to self-imposed, stemming from a desire to maintain their cultural tradition. Hoe's book is an attempt to provide a real-world picture of the monotonous life of laundrymen. Countering the "orientalist" view, Hoe chooses to explicate the human dimensions and the larger forces of racial discrimination that limits the choice of their career, and isolates them from the outside world and their families in China. This 86-page publication is a testimony detailing how the earlier generations of Chinese settlers were driven out of both skilled and unskilled occupations, and why they were left with the narrowest range of job options, and most settled in the service trades. In fact, they have been denied access to unions, banks, or the country altogether.

In *Enduring Hardship*, Hoe provides us a wealth of lived experience of the Chinese laundrymen and their families from coast to coast in Canada. In only eighty six pages, the author provides us with over 80 family pictures and personal testimonies from over forty-five families. The author is able to compile a meticulous and vivid picture of the lives of people in this ethnic industry literally across Canada. Through archival research, Hoe maps out the size and distribution of hand laundry in major cities, the daily routine of this exhausting career and detailed descriptions of instruments they used, price they charged and food they had from breakfast to dinner. The central theme of the book is about the extreme hardship that the Canadians of Chinese descent in this hand- laundry business had to endure throughout the late nineteen to twentieth century.

To set the socio-political situation as the backdrop, Hoe also collected a number of powerful political cartoons from the local newspapers that illustrate some of the blatantly discriminatory attitudes among Canadians, and the policies *vis-à-vis* the Chinese Canadians, such as the Chinese Head Tax and the Chinese Exclusion Act. The personal testimonies and family letters also help the readers connect the hardship of the laundrymen and the poverty in war torn China in the early 20th century. The reader can understand why the laundrymen would rather endure extreme hardship for meagre wages and why would they choose to live a monotonous life in this bachelor society. The most striking moment in this book is when the author subtly juxtaposes the details of the operation of this hand-laundry business with the starched white-collar shirt of their prominent clients, such as worn by the late Lester Pearson and Mackenzie King.

Every scholar and student of Canadian Studies, and lay reader is encouraged to read *Enduring Hardship*. Maybe it is because of limited space, Hoe chooses to keep a narrow focus and only foreground the hardship of the people in this industry. However, the author also opens up room for readers who are more interested in furthering their research on the resilience of the Chinese laundry. The readers will find the reference list at the end of the book very helpful. It includes Asian-American scholar Renqiu Yu's book, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York*. Compared to Yu's book, I personally believe Hoe could elaborate more on how the Chinese laundrymen themselves viewed the systemic oppression, and whether or not there were collective attempts to fight against racially-discriminatory policies. Without looking at the Chinese laundrymen's political actions, we are running into the risk of reinforcing the apolitical and hardworking character of Chinese immigrants as a socially-constructed model of a minority myth.

Rick Sin *Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto*

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