

Gladys Nipp and Stephen Mah Family Award
Research Proposal by Spencer Leong Cowie, Faculty of Fine Arts

Art is one of the most powerful tools of revolution and change across cultures and the world. Art, and more specifically music, can precisely capture a scene in all its stark reality, and excels at describing complex and nuanced situations where our languages fall short. Through a musical composition, I propose to feature the UVic Libraries' Chinese-Canadian collections in an art song about the struggle for immigrant equality.

Since coming to Victoria, I have been consistently impressed by the amount of Chinese-Canadian heritage and culture that pervades the city and its communities. Having recently visited the Vancouver Chinatown museum, and growing up next to North America's most Asian city Richmond, the Chinese immigrant story is one that I am very familiar with. Seeing so many similar stories preserved at UVic heartens me for the future.

This year, through one of my courses (MUS131), I was tasked to use the libraries' resources for an ethnographic research project on musical practices from different cultures. For my research, I decided to delve into the music of China's Greater Bay Area - which includes Guangdong province, Hong Kong, and Macau. As a third-generation Chinese-Canadian myself, this is the music of my family that has been part of the soundtrack of my childhood. I learned a lot about Cantonese opera and how it was designated an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO.

I propose to use the UVic Libraries' Chinese-Canadian collections as a centerpiece in a musical performance about cultural struggle, oppression, and resilience. This project would combine musical composition with sung or spoken oral

history, retelling the stories and amplifying the voices of Chinese-Canadians who fought for their equality in Canada. In particular, I would like to focus on the letters preserved in the Libraries' collection about the segregation of Chinese-Canadian children in Victoria schools. By featuring the texts within these letters in an art song, I can reinforce their message and share their story with others through performance. This idea came to me after listening to a brand new composition in UBC's Roy Barnett Recital Hall that featured audio clips from Japanese internment camp survivors. The piece made an extremely powerful statement, and left me with goosebumps.

In creating this project, I want to present an interpretation of Chinese Canadian history in an emotionally-charged and vibrant way. Using music as the medium of expression will allow me to reach wider audiences and make these collections more accessible to the public. Funding from this award would allow me to put on a performance (or performances) that is free to the public, which could be livestreamed and shared online as well.