

Chan Ka Nin's *Iron Road*: Chinese Elements in a Canadian Opera

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ABSTRACT

Chan Ka Nin's, *Iron Road*, is distinct as a Canadian opera for its cross-cultural significance in history and music. The building of the CPR, an historic Canadian event, is retold in a Western art form that Chan infuses with Chinese cultural and musical traditions. In a setting of the construction of the Fraser valley section of the railroad, he reveals some experiences of Chinese immigrants in an alien society; the Chinese characters sing their story as music drama in their own oral and musical languages, while the libretto contains aspects of their cultural heritage and philosophies. Responding to Chinese traditions and Western influences, Chan's music reflects not only his Chinese heritage but also, in the way he treats two musical traditions, reflects Canada's aim of being a pluristic society. Rather than bringing about fusion, his syncretic method of composition preserves the two traditions with innovations. Of most significance is his reconciliation of the conflicts between those two traditions.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a study of a Canadian opera. As an opera it is Canadian not only for being based on Canadian history but also for focusing on the Canadian immigrant experience.

Iron Road tells of Chinese labourers working in the West during the building of the CPR.

The purpose of this study is to examine how a Chinese-Canadian composer, Chan Ka Nin, created this opera within a Western context in the light of his Chinese heritage. By exploring Chan's musical approach to his opera, by studying the characters in the opera, and, in addition, by investigating the process of the opera's creation, I hope to reach an understanding of the meeting of East and West.

From my preliminary research and an initial interview with Chan Ka Nin, I formed a preconception of the opera as a love story placed in the setting of the building of the CPR. As I investigated further, it became apparent to me that the love story was subsumed by the emphasis on the Chinese identity of the characters, and that their portrayal was influenced by Chinese philosophical elements, by the Chinese language, by Chinese musical components, and by Chinese traditions.

In an examination of the historical background of the opera, this study will include both the story of the building of the CPR and the story of the creation of the opera. The structure will lay out the stages in the two stories in alternation, showing the similarities and differences between the huge commercial enterprise and the artistic creation.

With regard to the Chinese elements employed in the opera, I shall include a general study of Chinese opera, discussing its basic components, namely, the musical

elements, the use of the Chinese language, and the creative process involved in setting text to music. I shall then draw comparisons between the treatment of the musical elements of Chinese opera and their treatment in Chan's opera.

The story of *Iron Road* will be introduced in the chapter on a study of the characters. It will be seen that the Chinese characters, though shaped by dramatic necessity, and living in Western Canada, exhibit behaviour that may be seen to be either in compliance with or contrary to the teachings of Chinese religions but which, nonetheless, is to be found in Chinese society in real life. I should, therefore, give a brief discourse on Chinese religion is essential in that same chapter.

I shall also provide an overview of the compositional techniques that Chan employs: programmatic elements, and thematic and rhythmic treatments. The use of those techniques helps to convey distinct emotions or moods, and to depict landscape.

An investigation of the influence of Chinese cosmology on the musical structure will follow, with a look at the combination of a Chinese world-view with Western musical elements.

I have used romanization of Chinese written characters, in conformation with standard practice, in the chapter about the text setting in *Iron Road*. I have used diacritics to denote falling and rising tones where required, and, concurrently, employed phonetic notation to indicate the degree of the tones. Hand written Chinese characters will be included in the explanations of word groupings in sung lines.

In this study, I intend to indicate the extent to which Chinese elements have influenced the composition of the opera. Through a study of the leading characters, I hope to show how the Chinese language, philosophies and cultural beliefs are an essential part

of the development of the plot and music. Finally, I am going to point out how the Chinese and Western elements are combined in the opera. All three aspects work together to make ***Iron Road*** a unique Canadian opera that stands out as an example of multiculturalism manifested in art.

CHAPTER I

The Road to *Iron Road*

1. The Prologue: The Idea

The debut of *Iron Road* at Toronto's Elgin Theatre on 19 April, 2001 was the culmination of eleven years' creative labour. The scale of the opera was ambitious: a thirty-seven-member orchestra and cast of forty-two – consisting of lead singers, dancers and two choruses – performing in a \$1.2 million production. With its success, a creative team's dream was realized. However, before that success could be achieved, there lay the multiple challenges: the exigencies of writing the libretto and composing the music, the necessity of finding a company willing to take on and support the project during its long period of incubation, the difficulty of bringing together all the disparate creative forces that go into the mounting of a full-scale opera, and the arduous task of securing the necessary funding. In many respects meeting those challenges on the way to the realization of *Iron Road* encapsulated in miniature what it took to build the Canadian Pacific Railway, the band of steel rail and telegraph wire that, besides linking East and West Canada physically, helped to bring a sense of unity to the Canadian psyche. As Canadians (and other nationals) and Chinese labourers work together on the construction of the railway in *Iron Road*, the worlds of "East" and "West" are once again linked together but in a larger cultural ramification. The "rails" of the railway and of the opera run parallel to each other, and just as railway tracks sometimes meet and run across one another and can be perceived to converge at the distant horizon, the construction of the railway and the creation of the opera have points of convergence. Partnership and funding

issues were just two examples of what they had in common. One of the objectives of building the railway (uniting a nation) and of the opera (unifying people in a collective arts experience) has the effect of bringing people together through a sense of shared humanity. This section traces the development of the railway and the opera in tandem, and shows how the two lines of development sometimes had their parallels in trials and tribulation despite the vast difference in scale. Their respective histories, separated in time by more than a hundred years, are presented here in alternating stages.

2. The Birth of the Story

In 1990, when the forty-one year-old composer Chan Ka Nin started outlining an operatic love story, he had a modest chamber opera in mind. He wanted to experiment with operatic convention, a music genre that he had touched upon in some earlier works, among which were musical settings of a Chinese poem called “The Daughter of Master Chin,” and another piece from Chinese literature, called “*Yeh-Pan Yueh*”. Now, having written chamber, orchestral and vocal music, he saw opera as the next challenge for himself as a composer.

[Opera’s] a form, a much larger form than I’ve taken [previously] and having to work with a librettist is new, so is having to deal with the drama. It’s like a new approach.¹

The setting for what was at first intended to be his first chamber opera was conceived while he was contemplating the famous photograph “The Last Spike”, and the virtually untold story of the nearly fifteen thousand Chinese labourers employed in the

¹ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Train travel, as a metaphor of life as a journey, was the motif of another work that Chan composed around the same time that he started work on the opera in 1990. *Fantastic Journey* was an orchestral piece that Chan originally thought could be used as the overture to his embryonic opera. When the Calgary Philharmonic commissioned him to write something in 1990, he presented that piece, capitalizing on the state of mind he was in as he began composing his opera:

If you hear the two pieces, you will see a lot of the themes from ‘Fantastic Journey’ appear in the opera...The journey was two things: a train journey from East to West across Canada, and also a human journey. One of my uncles drew a parallel of his friends. Some of his friends died early – some of his friends lived on. He said, ‘we’re all on the train, and the ones who died earlier are the ones who get off the train earlier.’ That image kind of stuck with me. It’s kind of a curious way to look at life that way.²

What struck Chan as most significant about the commemorative photograph of “The Last Spike” being driven in by Donald Smith (later known as Lord Strathcona) is the total absence of Chinese faces from it, despite the large number of Chinese workers involved and the importance of their contribution to the building of the railway. To use the subject of the building of the CPR as a backdrop for a love story set among Chinese immigrants in the New World was an ambitious stroke on the composer’s part. The very scale of the “backdrop”, however, practically guaranteed that Chan’s music project would not fit into the format of a chamber opera and that it would be eventually vaulted into the realm of a full-scale opera. The building of the CPR was an epic undertaking and incorporating it into such an operatic project would require epic scope. Chan recognized

² Ibid.

that there was “an awful lot of dramatic potential”³ in the historical and cultural events included within the large, sweeping story of the Great Railway, and that there were parallels to be made with contemporary immigrants. Chinese immigrants coming to Canada with high hopes of improving their lives, the exploitation of labour in dangerous circumstances – those were but two of the drama-inducing elements. There was also the juxtaposition of Old World values in the New World that was ripe with opportunity but rife with discrimination, in the setting of a period of optimistic nation building. All the ingredients were there for a dramatic presentation that coincidentally fitted in with the current interest in Canada’s multicultural makeup and the stories within the history of the nation; furthermore, it was a story that were not very well known. Within the operatic form, Chan would tell a story in music about some of the missing faces in the old photograph.

3. The Composer

Chan’s personal experience gave him a particular insight into the life of a new immigrant. Born in Hong Kong in 1949, Chan moved to Vancouver with his family in 1965, where he attended high school. Music was always a part of his upbringing:

I was learning piano when I was four or five. I didn’t continue. I forgot now, but my mom said that either they had me discontinue, or I didn’t want to go. I don’t remember. My youngest sister plays, and I always like to hear her practise. At age ten or so, I picked up the violin and took lessons. Later on, I branched out to guitar, and in high school I played the trumpet. I liked all sorts of instruments. It was in my teens that I had an interest

³ Larry Lake interview with Chan Ka Nin, Mark Brownell and Wayne Strongman, CBC Radio, *Two New Hours*, July 1, 2001.

in music, but not classical music. Except for violin. Violin is classical, but we played pop music, and of course, school is also band music.⁴

It was in high school that he discovered an interest in composition, and through the encouragement of band teacher Pete Stigings, he was inspired enough to continue to write after graduation:

I wrote a piece for the band. The teacher was quite supportive. He had the band play it, and he even included it in the program. It was very encouraging for a young person to have your own pieces played by the school band.⁵

He entered the University of British Columbia and studied electrical engineering, a subject partly chosen according to his parent's wishes. As in so many families, particularly in Chinese families, he, being a boy, was encouraged to choose a practical profession rather than a riskier one. Chan is the second oldest boy in the family, and his elder brother is an accountant. He worked in the summers for an engineering firm while obtaining his degree. His parents knew his heart lay in music composition, and tried to suggest he could do both: "They thought, too, that 'you can do music on the side, you can have the job and you can come home and write whatever you want to do.'"⁶ Chan found that just did not work and that he had neither the time nor energy to write after a day at the engineering firm. It was not only his parent's own wish that he finish his degree; he wanted to prove to himself that he was capable of completing it, and to avoid later regret.

⁴ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Nevertheless, he found a source of refreshment in taking composition classes while finishing his program:

In composition, you are one on one with the teacher. It's someone who is paying full-time attention to you. That aspect is very comforting, whereas in engineering, there are hundreds of people in one class...Life in the engineering office isn't that glamorous.⁷

The person that made a difference and fueled his love for composition was Jean Coulthard. He credits her more than any one else with changing his life. Among other things she did for Chan was draw attention to his Chinese culture, advising him to use his original Chinese name and to look into himself as a source of inspiration:⁸

She's the one who helped me, or pointed out to me, to discover my own heritage. I remember the first assignment; she asked me to find some Chinese poem and set it to song. At that time, I found the Chinese poem, but I used the English translation. It probably wasn't very good. It was not original. At the time in Vancouver, I didn't know of any Chinese singer who could sing the original language. In her mind, though, Mahler had chosen a Chinese poem and it was a translation, so it was okay! It doesn't have to be authentic or anything.⁹

Chan thought he had more success with a piece called the "The Goddess of Mercy" that he wrote while studying with Coulthard. It was based on *Guan Yin*, a deity of kindness and forgiveness; many years later he incorporated one of the phrases of the chant into the Death scene of *Iron Road*. As much as Coulthard encouraged him to use

⁷ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

⁸ David Perman, *Whole Note Magazine*, April 1 – May 7, 2001.

⁹ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

his cultural background, Chan did not set himself to following her advice fully until the opportunity came with *Iron Road*:

I have lived about a third of my life in Hong Kong and two-thirds in Canada, and the influence of both cultures is inevitable. It is natural and normal for me to be floating between the two worlds – for example, a sandwich for lunch and then won-ton for a snack.¹⁰

His decision to continue with music was disconcerting to his parents¹¹, but it led him to Indiana University and then back to Canada, where he started teaching theory and composition at the University of Toronto in 1982. That same year he started receiving recognition as a composer, winning the Bela Bartok International Composers' Competition. He became involved in Toronto's Chinese music community in 1984.

It was as conductor of the Council of Chinese Canadian Choir that he heard from a founding member that "Chinese women were denied entry to Canada around the time of the building of the railway."¹² While not historically true in regard to official legislation (it was the United States, not Canada, that specifically excluded females of Chinese extraction from 1875 to 1882)¹³, it provided the germ of his love story. The basic idea would be that a young Chinese woman, disguised as a man, falls in love in the New Land. A precedent for such a disguise was the historical figure of Mulan, the daughter of a Chinese warrior who disguises herself as a man to go into battle in her father's stead.

¹⁰ *China Daily*, May 4, 2001.

¹¹ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

¹² Chan Ka Nin's personal notes.

¹³ George Anthony Peffer, *If They Don't Bring Their Women Here: Chinese Female Immigration before Exclusion*, Chicago: University of Illinois, 1999, p. 113.

From a chance discovery of a *Victoria Colonist* newspaper story from the 1860s Chan learned of the arrival of about 265 Chinese migrants on a Norwegian ship from Hong Kong; at the time of disembarkation, one of passengers was found to be a young woman.¹⁴ Further information about the mysterious woman has likely been lost forever to history, but for a twentieth century Chinese-Canadian composer, the brief mention of her was enough to furnish the needed historical authenticity for the basic ingredient of his operatic story. Chan's lead character would then be a young woman who journeys to Canada in the guise of a man and finds love while searching for her father.

As the opera developed further, interesting parallels can be found between its progress and the story of the building of the CPR. The economic problems and other difficulties they faced, and the challenges and setbacks they overcame followed a similar pattern, despite their vast differences in scale and magnitude. It is with those parallels in mind that I shall now relate the story of the two undertakings, alternating between them.

4. The Genesis I: A Railway

While Chan's "small chamber opera" love story had modest beginnings, the start of the Canadian Pacific Railway was always conceptualized on a scale of nationalistic grandeur – the unification of the vast young country. When Sir John A. Macdonald first envisioned a Canada stretching from sea to sea, he was recognizing that a transcontinental transportation and communication link was a vital need for such a widespread nation.¹⁵

¹⁴ Chan Ka Nin's personal note.

¹⁵ Keith Morris, *The Story of the Canadian Pacific Railway*, London: William Stevens Limited, 1916, p. 74.

British Columbia was considering union with Canada in 1870, and one of its terms was that the Dominion should initiate work on a transcontinental railway within two years. It was agreed that the project would be completed within ten years.¹⁶ With the promise of a railway to reduce its isolation, B.C. became part of Canada in 1871.¹⁷ Joining the Dominion also countered the threat of American assimilation, a very real concern of the fledgling west coast colony that was feeling pinched in following the establishment in 1853 of the American territory that would eventually become Washington and the U.S. purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867. MacDonald knew that encroachment by the U.S. was a real possibility in other parts of the country as well; seeing what little sovereignty Canada could exercise over the remote Red River district, the State Legislature of Minnesota was highly interested in acquiring the whole area.¹⁸ A national railway was vital to securing Canada's interests.

5. The Genesis II: An Opera

On July 31, 1990, Chan approached a CBC Radio producer he knew with a one-page outline of his proposed opera to see if the idea was feasible. David Jaeger was immediately interested and arranged for CBC to commission it. Chan took on the responsibility of finding who could develop the work and where it might be developed.

¹⁶ John Murray, Gibbon, *Steel of Empire: The Romantic History of the Canadian Pacific, the Northwest Passage of Today*, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1935, p. 157

¹⁷ Pierre Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, Toronto: MacClelland and Stewart Limited, 1974. pp. 19-22.

Taking up Jaeger's suggestion, Chan approached the Tapestry Music Theatre in Toronto; it so happened that Tapestry was at that moment looking for new Canadian operas to produce.

Tapestry was founded in 1979 as a choral group. "The Tapestry Singers," as the group was then called, had incorporated into its repertoire works that were both theatrical and musical. The name was changed some time later to "Tapestry Music Theatre" (not to be confused with Broadway-style musical theatre.) Still later, the name "Tapestry New Opera Works" was adopted as a more accurate reflection of the company's mandate.¹⁹ One of its company's initiatives was to found the "Great Canadian Music Theatre Project" whose aim was to encourage composers and writers to come to it with ideas for music theatre and opera. Chan set about creating a complete treatment through the remainder of the year to present to Tapestry.

6. CPR: Surveying the Land

In 1870 Macdonald's government appointed an engineer-in-chief to find a viable route for the railway across twenty-five hundred miles of prairie and mountain, including the granite of the Canadian Shield.²⁰ Aside from the barriers represented by the mountain ramparts, the surveyors faced a formidable obstacle in the muskeg, that spongy mixture of seemingly bottomless forest detritus, peat, silt and mud that creates large bogs across

¹⁸ Valerie Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy 1540-1990*, Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1992. p. 49.

¹⁹ Howard Dyck interview with Chan Ka Nin, Grace Chan, and Stuart Howe, CBC Radio, *Saturday Afternoon at The Opera*, November 2001.

²⁰ McKee and Klassen, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

Ontario and Manitoba that were capable of swallowing whole trains. Several surveying teams struggled across the barely populated land during the summer heat and winter cold. In many areas, the surveyors were in unexplored territory.²¹

7. *Iron Road: Mapping the Story*

For composer Chan Ka Nin, the challenge in building his opera lay in mapping out a story line. “Well, there must have been good reasons why a lot of operas were based on existing plays or stories because, as I found out soon enough, the story itself was half the battle.”²² His choice of writer for the libretto was his younger brother Edmond²³. It promised to be a natural fit. Edmond was living in Toronto, having graduated from the Ryerson College Film School. He was an English major, could play the piano, had written several screen plays – a great advantage in the circumstances – and, furthermore, understood the Cantonese dialect. That Edmond was Chan’s younger brother was in itself an attraction: their collaboration would allow the two men to get to know each other better. Chan is eight years older than Edmond, and had been away studying at university while Edmond was in his teens. While brainstorming ideas for the plot of the opera, it came as a shock to Chan to learn that his brother had had a difficult childhood. Chan chastised himself for not having been aware of that while he was concentrating on his studies and building his career as a composer. He had won recognition and awards,

²¹ Pierre Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1974, pp. 36-41.

²² Chan Ka Nin’s personal notes.

²³ Chan Ka Nin uses the name “Edmond” in referring to his brother; so, to differentiate between the two brothers, I will refer to the composer’s brother as “Edmond”.

including the Bela Bartok International Composition Competition, the Barlow International Competition, the Chalmers Awards, and a Juno Award. Major orchestras and international ensembles had performed his music, but his success was now tempered by the realization of his earlier ignorance of his brother's troubles. While working on a revised draft and discussing the theme of the opera, Chan and Edmond were going through what Chan described as a "wide range of human emotions."²⁴ There was the basic need to create a story, but there was also the wish to take advantage of the opportunity to reacquaint himself with his brother. Together, starting in February 1991, they set about working on a draft that was more extensive than Chan's first solo effort.

8. CPR: Raising Capital

Sir John A. Macdonald also sought out a particular partnership to build the railway. He wanted to have private investors take on the task of building the railway on contract.²⁵ After rejecting one offer from a syndicate that was predominantly American, the government endorsed an offer from a Montreal shipping mogul named Hugh Allan. However, behind Allan, unknown to the government at the time of signing the railway charter, were the same American backers that had formed the syndicate whose bid had

²⁴ Chan Ka Nin's personal notes.

²⁵ John Murray Gibbon, *Steel of Empire: The Romantic History of the Canadian Pacific, the Northwest Passage of Today*, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1935, pp. 167-168.

been rejected.²⁶ The Canadian Pacific Railway Company was incorporated February 1873.²⁷ Optimism was soon to run onto a rocky road.

9. *Iron Road: Fund Raising*

In April, 1991, Chan met the artistic director of Tapestry, Wayne Strongman. Strongman has been responsible for commissioning over twenty new Canadian operas and music theatre productions. In addition to working with Tapestry, he has also been associated with studio workshops and concerts for the English National Opera. The composer had brought with him recordings of some of his compositions for Strongman to listen to later, but in the meantime he played on Strongman's piano a theme from *A Fantastic Journey*. Strongman liked what he heard and started "coaching" the two brothers informally as they continued working in collaboration on the draft.²⁸ At the end of the next month, Chan, Edmond and Strongman met at the Tapestry office. The company's interest in the project was explicit: "Go ahead!"²⁹ Tapestry was anxious to get behind an original work that had such potential. There then followed an intense time of writing and rewriting, a period that hinted at the innumerable drafts to come during the decade, right up to the final rehearsals.

In mid-October 1991, Chan and Edmond handed Strongman a ninth version of the treatment. Funding money was meanwhile starting to trickle in. The Gerber Foundation put in \$1,000 and the Ontario Arts Council granted \$4,500 of seed money. Edmond had

²⁶ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, pp. 70-75.

²⁷ McKee and Klassen, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

²⁸ Chan Ka Nin's personal notes.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

made a draft of the story and was working on the libretto for the first scene. A believable love story, however, was proving to be elusive.

10. CPR: Off the Rails

Two months after the incorporation of the Canadian Pacific Company, Macdonald's Conservative government was derailed. The Liberal Opposition had exposed in the press the substantial financial support that the Conservatives had received from the Montreal shipping mogul Hugh Allan during the 1872 election.³⁰ Hugh Allan had been given the profitable railway charter but Macdonald had tried to hide the donations Allan had made to his financially strapped party. There was no denying the political damage that the newspapers had caused by printing the telegrams sent by Allan that revealed his and Macdonald's "agreement."³¹ Although a parliamentary committee found no direct evidence of what is now termed "conflict of interest," the "Pacific Scandal" brought down Macdonald's government.³² The early inauguration of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company collapsed and the company was dissolved. It would take five years for the CPR to get back on track.

³⁰ John Murray Gibbon, *Steel of Empire: The Romantic History of the Canadian Pacific, the Northwest Passage of Today*, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1935, pp. 170-171.

³¹ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, pp. 70-95.

³² McKee and Klassen, *loc. cit.*

11. *Iron Road*: First Collaboration Failed

The early summer of 1992 saw Chan suffering a period of doubt that severely shook his faith in his project. Questions of funding were a concern, but the worst blow was personal. Having attempted several times to create a convincing and dramatically arresting story together, the two brothers had to face up to the painful recognition that their collaboration was not working. With *Tapestry* already committed to going ahead with the project, a difficult decision had to be made if the opera was to be saved from rusting in place before it could move forward. On July 2, Edmond withdrew from the project. The effect on Chan was immediate and tumultuous, marking “the beginning of the treacherous road of creating the operatic story.”³³ In addition to regretting the lost opportunity of working with his brother, Chan now doubted himself, wondering if his insistence on his idea for the love story might be sabotaging the whole project.³⁴ While he still believed that a leading character of a woman-disguised-as-a-man could find love in the midst of the turmoil of the building of the CPR, Chan was unsure of what the next step should be. He had had such high hopes of working with his brother that he had no idea who else might be able to write the libretto. That question would haunt him for the next six years.

³³ Chan Ka Nin’s personal notes.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

12. CPR: Staking the Line

The five-year period following 1873 was marked for the railway by false starts and delays. MacDonald's government was replaced by Alexander Mackenzie's Liberals. Mackenzie faced an economic depression with a resulting decline in government revenues for large-scale projects. He was not inclined to build the railway, regarding such an ambitious project as being wasteful and foolhardy. Mackenzie maintained that a transcontinental link could be approached slowly and on the basis of demand over a twenty-year period. Minimal work was done on advancing the promised railway towards the distant residents of Victoria, with the consequence that British Columbia considered leaving the Dominion.³⁵ Just as Macdonald had preferred to find private investors to fund the bulk of the railway construction, Mackenzie sought out private companies for the building contracts, but this time on a section-by-section basis. That was to be the pattern in the future, even after the end of Mackenzie government's term in office. To satisfy Western Canadian interests, some work was begun on the line from Lake Superior to Winnipeg.³⁶

After five years in power, Mackenzie's government, plagued by the depression, was faced with accusations of corruption in the handling of railway contracts, and was losing the confidence of the public which did not believe he was protecting Canadian interests from the growing economic weight of the States. Mackenzie lost heavily to Macdonald in the September 1878 election when Macdonald was swept back into power

³⁵ Keith Morris, *The Story of the Canadian Pacific Railway*, London: William Stevens Limited, 1916, pp. 77-78.

³⁶ McKee and Klassen, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

on a “National Policy” campaign that caught the nationalistic fervor of the public. His policy promised protection of Canadian industry through higher tariffs, and the construction of a transcontinental railway to encourage Western settlement and to transport raw resources from the promising new lands to the rest of Canada.³⁷ The stage was being set for further waves of immigration and for hastening the building of the railway that was to tie the country together.

13. *Iron Road: Finding a New Path*

Chan Ka Nin resumed work on his opera without his brother and found that, contrary to his customary way of working, where “I basically just closed the door and composed whatever was at hand,”³⁸ he now had to work in a more collaborative fashion. Formerly, it had been his habit to work secluded from other creative influences, and the work he had done with his brother had been relatively free of external considerations. However, when Chan embarked on a first draft of Act I, Scene 1, he became more aware of the teamwork required in the creation of an opera. He eventually found himself working with several partners, in both a creative and in an administrative capacity. The project was continuing slowly to attract attention from funding bodies. In October of 1992, five thousand dollars was secured from the Toronto Arts Council. In the same month, Chan was introduced through Tapestry to another potential writer of the libretto.

The second writer presented his first draft and character outlines in the spring of 1993. Development of the music that year culminated in a summer workshop at the York

³⁷ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, pp. 162-163.

³⁸ Chan Ka Nin’s personal notes.

Quay Centre July 11, 1993, where Chan was able to present some songs for the chorus, three duets and a solo. At one point in the early stages of the opera, Chan was using the working title “Mulan,” after the Chinese legendary female warrior. The Disney Corporation’s release of their animated feature of the same name, though, deterred Chan from using it as a title for the opera. The names of characters were still in flux. That autumn brought a Canada Council grant for further development.

At a November 12th meeting between Wayne Strongman, Chan and the second writer, a deadline in January was set for the completion of the second draft. In December Chan made a phone call to the prolific and experienced composer, Louis Applebaum (one of whose last compositions before his death was the opera *Erewhon*, written with librettist Mavor Moore, and premièred by Pacific Opera Victoria in 1999), who helped clarify some of the copyright issues. Applebaum was the first president of the SOCAN, the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada. He did not set the distribution of royalties between Chan as the composer and the librettist, but quite far along in the development of *Iron Road*, Chan and his final creative partner worked out that the composer owned two thirds of the copyright and the librettist one third.³⁹

14. CPR: Back on Track

Once back in office, Macdonald’s government proceeded to look for a suitable group of capitalists to build the major part of the railway line.⁴⁰ Intending to show federal

³⁹ Chan Ka Nin’s personal notes.

⁴⁰ Keith Morris, *The Story of the Canadian Pacific Railway*, London: William Stevens Limited, 1916, p. 79.

support for the project, the government embarked on improving existing lines and then signed a contract in 1879 for construction of the first hundred miles of track immediately west of Winnipeg.⁴¹ Preliminary surveys through the Rockies had confirmed a relatively short but difficult route down the Fraser canyon. The western terminus had yet to be decided upon and a route through the Selkirk Range remained to be discovered. Those considerations did not stop the government from jumping ahead and seeking bids to build a line from Yale through the Fraser canyon and Thompson valley to Kamloops, even before a route to that section had been defined.⁴² The Fraser route and the yet-to-be-laid route through the Canadian Shield north of Lake Superior were both identified as the most difficult and hazardous to build. The Minister of Public Works was Charles Tupper, and he was responsible for the railway sections built with government funds. The government was wary both of getting directly involved in building the two most difficult sections and of having under-financed contractors tackle the job. Liberal Senator Joseph Whitehead's 63-mile section west of the Great Lakes had run into huge cost overruns during the Mackenzie years.⁴³ When wealthy engineer Andrew Onderdonk from New York put in a bid to build the Fraser River section, Charles Tupper made certain he was awarded the contract. Onderdonk was American and had the backing of a large syndicate which at least gave him some assurance that he would not be at a loss for funds. Though it was not in keeping with Macdonald's "Canada for Canadians" campaign slogan, Macdonald's government would pay the experienced engineer to build the line, even if

⁴¹ McKee and Klassen, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁴² Pierre Berton, *The Great Railway*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1971, p. 98.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

the back-room dealing made a mockery of the bidding process.⁴⁴ The government was determined to have the line built on time to satisfy B.C.'s terms and to ensure a route that was "all-Canadian"⁴⁵ by dint of its being all on Canadian territory, without deviating to the St. Paul, Minnesota line. A syndicate made up largely of Canadian directors was given the contract to build the remaining 1,900 miles of track and to operate the Atlantic to Pacific rail network.⁴⁶ On February 16, 1881 the Canadian Pacific Railway was once again incorporated.⁴⁷

15. *Iron Road*: Searching for the Librettist

A third draft and a story line for Act I written by the second writer in early 1994 did not meet expectations. The second writer left March 21. As Wayne Strongman has said, there are few librettists in Canada and writing an original "book" for such a project is particularly daunting:

This art form requires a writer who can also write in an evocative but distilled style that becomes a libretto. A libretto consists of text that is completed emotionally by the music.⁴⁸

Two writers were engaged two months later. Chan had met one of the writers at Tapestry at the end of 1992. On May 18, Chan also met Chinese-Canadian historian Paul

⁴⁴ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, p. 355.

⁴⁵ Berton, *The Great Railway*, p. 123.

⁴⁶ Pierre Berton, *The Last Spike*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1971, p. 425.

⁴⁷ McKee and Klassen, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁴⁸ Cathleen Bond interview with Wayne Strongman, *Canadian Arts & Culture*, 2001.

Yee, whose 1988 book *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* was used as a resource to help fill out the story. Yee contributed periodically to the story outline of the opera, not as a librettist but as a historical consultant. Yee's previous research into the experience of Chinese labourers on the Railway led to a 1996 book for children called *Ghost Train*, about a Chinese young woman who is invited by her overseas father to join him while he is working on the Great Railway. Before they are reunited, she finds out he has been killed. In her grief, she makes a painting of a ghostly train. One night she dreams of the ghost train filled with dead workers that cannot rest in peace until she has performed a ritual burning of the painting. That she does upon her return to China.

The amount of work put into the opera by this time made it necessary to make more formal arrangements with potential writers of the libretto, and the details of copyright agreement were subsequently worked out with the writers' agents.

The summer of 1994 brought the two writers and the composer together and much progress was made on Act I. Chan was pleased with the development. At the beginning of 1994, he had consulted with Leon Major, later the Artistic Director of the Boston Lyric Opera (1998 – 2003), seeking feedback on the opera's structure. Major, as Director of the Maryland Opera Studio at the University of Maryland School of Music and director of many plays and operas in Canada, the U.S. and Europe, is well respected and has close connections to the Canadian theatre community, having completed his BA at the University of Toronto. On August 4, a complete story outline was submitted to Major and five days later, the team reviewed Major's comments and discussed adapting more of the Mulan legend for the story. Up to that point Chan had been working on individual songs

for yet-to-be linked scenes. He experimented with setting moods with music and played with ideas of character dynamics, as skeletal as the characters still were.

At the end of August, the creative team met at Tapestry with Strongman and discussed the second draft of the story outline as submitted by the two writers. The discussion carried on into the next day via conference call with Leon Major's input. In September of 1994, Chan entered into an intensive period of work on the production of a story line communicating with the writers by fax. He was becoming increasingly worried about the lack of a completed outline; too many factors concerning suitable dramatic structure were left in the air. A new story draft was discussed and many meetings were held at Chan's home. A reading of the draft was tentatively scheduled for December 12, prior to the departure of one of the writers for Thailand.

The next year, 1995, brought Chan and Strongman to the realization that the subject matter was definitely not going to fit into the proposed chamber opera size, and that it all too clearly demanded a full-scale opera. A work-through of Wanli's (later called Manli – the bookman) first scene was done in May and a workshop of scenes from a third draft of the libretto was planned for mid-August. The first half of August was taken up with a presentation and discussion of the main love song. That month ended with a meeting at Chan's home, which saw the presentation of the first two verses of one of the arias for the male protagonist, James Nichol (the female protagonist's love interest). As other obligations and engagements pressed upon the writers, the next meeting did not take place until January 1996. On May 15, there was a further meeting at which two arias were presented in Tapestry's studio. The two writers had given the story line their all, but the results lacked the necessary spark, and one of the writers left the project.

The issue of an effective story line had to be addressed, and on May 15 Strongman came to Chan's house for a brainstorming session on who could be found to complete the writing. Chan put together a synopsis and showed it to the anxious music director at the beginning of June. Chan then worked closely with the remaining writer on a script for Act I.⁴⁹

Chan had been imagining for some years now what some of the more developed characters, such as the "beautiful tomboyish"⁵⁰ character, her father and her lover, might actually look like. He had been pondering the problem of how the lead female character could keep her gender hidden from the audience until a dramatic moment:

When my imagination failed, I asked my wife Alice to dress as a man to see how plausible it was to have a female disguised on stage. She was a good enough sport to actually try it. She *looked* [Chan's emphasis] manly enough; but as soon as she walked, it gave it all away, so we did not even attempt to conceal the disguise from the audience.⁵¹

Alice is a pianist, composer and teacher whom Chan calls his "unconditioned sounding board," and someone whom he could rely on to give him "instinctive responses to all my questions and doubts."⁵² To garner comment, he would sometimes play something for her while working on the opera. In between raising two daughters, he and Alice talk about music. Their house is arranged so that Chan's study is on the top floor

⁴⁹ Chan Ka Nin's personal notes.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

loft, and Alice's is on the ground floor, because, as Chan puts it, it is important that they not hear each other in the midst of composing.⁵³

A review of Yee's outline was completed before Christmas. It was looking as if there was now a viable structure now upon which to build the opera, though much fleshing out was still required. They tried out various drafts of some of the characters' dialogue. The next year promised more intensive workshopping. Chan was clinging to the hope that the librettist problem would soon be solved.⁵⁴

16. CPR: The Rockies and Finding the Labour Force

On the morning of May 14th, 1880, the walls of the Fraser canyon echoed with the first explosions of the railway construction.⁵⁵ Andrew Onderdonk had started work on the formidable section that had some of the most difficult terrain in North America across which to build a railway. Because the Minister of Railways liked having only one contractor for all four sections, Onderdonk would end up being responsible for laying one hundred and twenty-seven miles of track from Port Moody on the east end of Burrard Inlet through to Kamloops.⁵⁶ The far from easy work would end up testing all of Onderdonk's skills and considerable resources. From Yale to Lytton there were sixty miles of sheer rock walls descending to the white water of the Fraser River, and countless

⁵³ Interview with Cha Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

⁵⁴ Chan Ka Nin's personal notes.

⁵⁵ John Murray Gibbon, *Steel of Empire: The Romantic History of the Canadian Pacific, the Northwest Passage of Today*, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1935, p. 188.

⁵⁶ Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 185.

granite spurs and deep ravines to bridge. The rail bed would have to be carved out of solid rock face, some of it reaching summits thousands of feet high. From Onderdonk's headquarters at Yale, four tunnels would have to be constructed within a distance of one and a half miles; over the whole Onderdonk line there were an estimated twenty-three tunnels to be blasted and dug. One tunnel alone was to be sixteen hundred feet long. Millions of tons of rock would have to be moved. More than six hundred bridges and trestles would be needed, requiring forty million board feet of lumber.⁵⁷ At the same time as building the railway, the contractor was obligated to maintain the old Cariboo Road that ran over the same route, and was used by horse teams to move supplies to the interior. The railway would have to run over, under, and beside that road.⁵⁸

Onderdonk initially estimated that he would need ten thousand men to accomplish the contracts. In all probability, he would need an additional seven thousand more because of turnover. That was at a time when the total population of British Columbia was about thirty-five thousand. Thus, there was an immediate shortage of labour.⁵⁹

The American engineer's first supply of outside labour came from the States, where there were workers congregated around San Francisco as a result of the California Gold Rush and the boom in railroad building. The workers recruited by Onderdonk in the beginning were not sufficient in number, and, of those, many were unemployed urban

⁵⁷ Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 187.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁵⁹ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, p. 359.

workers, such as clerks and bartenders, who were unused to backbreaking labour.⁶⁰

Almost from the start, Onderdonk knew he would have to have a large supply of hard workers renowned for being economical to hire and efficient in working on railroads; that meant Chinese labourers.

Their reputation as excellent workers had already been established in the 1860s by their work on the building of that other engineering feat, the Cariboo Wagon Road. About one thousand Chinese had been employed after Governor Douglas had commissioned the construction of the road to serve the burgeoning mining industry. One contractor responsible for the section around Lytton and Spence's Bridge said, "I found all the Chinese employed worked most industriously and faithfully and gave me no trouble."⁶¹ A large number of the white labourers had left for the gold fields further north as soon as they had saved enough money, leaving the road contractors short of labour.

As railway workers, the Chinese had gained an additional excellent reputation during the building of the Central Pacific Railroad in the Sierra region of the United States, also in the 1860s. The main contractor had hired fifty unemployed Chinese miners as an "experiment" to supplement the white labourers.⁶² Their clean camps and ability to travel light with all they needed on their backs, to walk as far as twenty-five miles before quickly setting up camp again, their adaptability to the thin mountain air, and their hardiness with pick and shovel — all made them valuable workers. However, it was their

⁶⁰ John Murray Gibbon, *Steel of Empire: The Romantic History of the Canadian Pacific, the Northwest Passage of Today*, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1935, p. 241.

⁶¹ Harry Con, et al. *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1982, p. 18.

⁶² Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 197.

lower rate of pay compared to that of the white workers (who required room and board on top of their wages) that prompted the hiring of nearly nine thousand from the Chinese labour market before the railroad was completed. Their labour saved the Central Pacific an estimated \$5.5 million.⁶³

The first Chinese to arrive in Western Canada were mostly gold seekers from California who were attracted by reports in 1858 of gold strikes in the Fraser valley and the Cariboo. Onderdonk's promises of work drew a second influx of approximately fifteen hundred from California and Oregon, but the number was far from enough to meet his requirements. Some businessmen and labour councils feared that Onderdonk's Chinese immigrants were going to overwhelm the country and deprive the white people of jobs. As soon as he arrived in Victoria on April 1880, Onderdonk was met by an anti-Chinese delegation that wanted assurance that he would be hiring only whites. Onderdonk would not promise such exclusivity and said that he would hire British Columbian white labourers until the supply was exhausted, then he would use French-Canadians, and when that proved insufficient, he would hire Indians and Chinese.⁶⁴ Before long, the reality was that he needed the Chinese, or what was at the time inaccurately called "Coolie" labour.

According to Anthony B. Chan, "the virtual slavery of the coolie labour system in the West Indies and South America never prevailed in the United States and Canada."⁶⁵ The use of the word "Coolie" to describe the railway workers is tantamount to calling them slaves, and slaves they were not. Patricia Roy and Jin Tan write that "strictly

⁶³ Anthony B. Chan, *Gold Mountain: The Chinese in The New World*, Vancouver: New Star Books, 1983, p. 59.

⁶⁴ Berton, *The Last Spike*, 1971, p. 194.

⁶⁵ Anthony B. Chan, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

speaking, coolies were indentured labourers and they were not employed in Canada, but in common North American usage the term ‘coolie’ applied to any cheap, unskilled labour.”⁶⁶ While Berton points out that the labourers were not slaves,⁶⁷ he used the term “coolie” in the sense of ‘Chines railway workers,’ much as ‘navvie’ was used to describe Caucasian labourers. Anthony Chan provides a Chinese perspective on the term, showing how the term came to be considered derogatory, and, moreover, that it belongs to a sordid period of Chinese history. The “Coolie” trade is properly applied to the seizure and sale of cheap human labour that took place between 1845 and the late 1870s. According to Chan, the term “Coolie” comes from the Chinese word *kuli*, meaning “bitter strength.”⁶⁸ The “coolie” trade was a particular response to the demand for cheap, expendable labour in the West, a demand that increased after the abolition of slavery by several European powers in the early 19th century. The United States abolished slavery in 1808, though it continued illegally in the southern states until the end of the Civil War in 1865. The greatest demands for cheap labour were made by the English, Portuguese and Spanish: their colonies needed low-cost workers in sugar cane, cotton and coffee plantations in the West Indies and South America. Many Chinese workers were left unemployed following the Opium War and the Taiping Rebellion, and after the Treaty of Nanjing that in 1842 helped open up China to Western trade. The traffic in cheap labour was a profitable

⁶⁶ Jim Tan and Patricia E. Roy, *The Chinese in Canada*, Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association with the support of the Multiculturalism Program, Government of Canada, 1985, p. 4.

⁶⁷ Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 199.

⁶⁸ Anthony B.Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

business for the “*compradores*” (intermediaries.)⁶⁹ Agents of the *compradores* would bribe, persuade or kidnap Chinese men in order to sell them as labourers. Some were even sold by their own families to pay off debts; others were acquired as spoils of war after battles between clans, taken to “Coolie” exporting firms such as those at Xiamen seaport, then shipped to various destinations. Many from the thousands of unemployed sold themselves into this form of slavery. Sometimes those who resisted the persuasions of the agents were knocked unconscious and forced into labour against their will.⁷⁰

The Chinese government, the *Ch'ing* court, officially disapproved of the “Coolie” trade, but being powerless to stop it, at first chose to ignore it. Eventually, resistance to the trade grew until the government could no longer turn a blind eye, and an Anti-Coolie Trade Commission was established in Shanghai in 1859. After the governor-general of the southern province of Guangdong legalized immigration, travelers had to be cleared by Chinese officials. That was the official end of the “Coolie” trade, but it was not until Spain and Portugal agreed to regulate Chinese immigration to their colonies in the late 1870s that the trade really ended.⁷¹

Under the British North America Act of 1867, Canadian immigration policy was a joint provincial and federal jurisdiction, but fell under federal responsibility after 1872.⁷² Subsequent moves by B.C. provincial legislators to set strict limits on the number of permitted Chinese immigrants were countered by Macdonald’s federal government which

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Anthony B.Chan, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-41.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

realized that to have the railway built without excessive delay and cost required the admittance of a large Chinese labour force. Macdonald referred to the Chinese as “an alien race in every sense of the word” but said publicly in Parliament to reluctant ministers that “either you must have this labour or you can’t have the railway.”⁷³

Throughout the early 1880s, more than fifteen thousand Chinese labourers were brought to Victoria from Hong Kong to help fill Onderdonk’s desperate need of workers.⁷⁴ The workers were procured under the contract labour system by which labourers chose their destination for immigration and paid their own way, usually by obtaining an advance for the trans-Pacific passenger ticket from a contractor (the successor to the “Coolie” agents or *compradores* who formerly would have purchased or kidnapped workers). The contractor also made arrangements for labour contracts with foreign companies, and agents oversaw the remittance of money to the workers’ families in China. When the men arrived in Canada, a network was formed by the Chinese community to help the men with their food, lodging and clothing. After 1884, the network in Canada was called the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association.⁷⁵

The contract labour system was more accountable than the “Coolie” trade had been. Processing depots set up by the Hong Kong contracting companies had to ensure the good health of every man boarding the ships while British colonial regulations required each ship to have one or more doctors on board. Chinese officials at the port of departure had to be convinced that every labourer was emigrating voluntarily. Because

⁷³ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, pp. 359-360.

⁷⁴ Anthony B.Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

each had signed on of his own volition and was travelling as a free immigrant, bound to a contract for specific work and wages from which he was to repay the agent for his ticket, the value placed on each worker was higher than in the “Coolie” trade.⁷⁶

The majority of the Chinese labourers for the CPR came from the southern province of Guangdong where free trade was allowed. The province was suffering from the economic hardship brought on by political instability, by famines and by several other natural disasters; consequently, the farmers from Guangdong were desperate.⁷⁷ Work with the CPR in British Columbia offered them the possibility of saving enough money to return to China and make a new start with their families. The lure of *Gum San* (Gold Mountain), as the Chinese called North America, drew them with the hope of a better life.⁷⁸

17. *Iron Road*: The Librettist

1997 was a pivotal year for Chan Ka Nin and the development of his now expanded opera. The hope of finding a suitable librettist was starting to fade away. Once again, Chan was faced with intimations that his planned love story, particularly because of its being interracial, was holding up the project:

It seemed the love interest in this fictional story posed the most problems for the writers. I had a hard time convincing the creative team that this was where I was aiming for musically. But if one was caught up with history, the emotional connectivity might be lost.

⁷⁶ Anthony B.Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁷⁷ Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 198.

⁷⁸ Anthony B. Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

Instead of composing, I found myself having to defend why the young Chinese woman had to dress up as a man, and why she fell in love with someone who helped her – I thought it was opera.⁷⁹

Paul Yee had submitted some historical aspects to add to the story line that provoked much discussion between Chan, Yee, and Strongman in the first month of that year, but the script was still on loose footing.

Like many all-purpose and versatile Canadian theatre companies, Tapestry, in order to survive, was involved in numerous projects simultaneously. The company was rapidly establishing itself in the forefront of the presentation of new opera in Canada. It had presented the multi-media opera, *Elsewhereless*, created by filmmaker Atom Egoyan and composer Rodney Sharman. In 1997, Tapestry co-presented Theresa Tova's *Still the Night*, which then went on tour for the next two years. During the time spent on the early development of *Iron Road*, one of the projects Tapestry organized was a series of composer/librettist laboratories to help foster new talent. The laboratories brought composers and playwrights together in a series of intensive workshops. That year, 1997, the Laboratory was held February 3-5. Chan Ka Nin participated as a member of one of four teams taking turns creating short scenes. He was partnered with a Canadian-born playwright, Mark Brownell. Between them they created a lightly humorous scene entitled "Secret Society," based on a poem of Brownell's that described an organization so secret that no one could say what it was. It was a valuable exercise for freeing up creativity and the duo found they worked well together – they had "clicked".⁸⁰ The

⁷⁹ Chan Ka Nin's personal notes.

⁸⁰ *Globe and Mail*, April 19, 2001.

humourous skit was not developed further, but Chan was left with a favourable impression that he was to recall in the dark days ahead.

Meanwhile, Chan was coming close to his wit's end in his search for a librettist. Tapestry had tried to pair Chan with a Chinese writer of Chinese heritage,⁸¹ and over six years five different writers had been involved. Although a true collaboration with Chan had not come into fruition, each of the five, including his brother, Edmond, had helped to advance the story line, refine direction and ideas, and find enough material to answer the demands of the story.⁸²

There had been several workshops, numerous conference calls, and many late night discussions in various homes. Much money had been spent. But still there was no libretto. In spite of Strongman's guidance and support over the years, Chan knew Tapestry was now having serious reservations about the opera project.⁸³ It was possible that his opera was going to be scrapped before it was completed, all for the want of a librettist to create a structured, plausible story that struck a balance between human relationships and historical events. It consistently came down to the Chinese writers expressing doubt about whether they were the right one to write the libretto. One writer expressed the reservation that one might need to have been born in Canada to have the

⁸¹ Chan Ka Nin's personal notes.

⁸² Howard Dyck interview with Wayne Strongman, CBC Radio, *Saturday Afternoon at the Opera*, November 24, 2001.

⁸³ Chan Ka Nin's personal notes.

validity or authority to write the script, especially when it came to the treatment of the interracial relationship of the protagonists.⁸⁴

In May of the same year, Chan resolved to make one final attempt: he would approach a librettist on his own, outside the company, without mentioning money or business arrangements. All he would do was try to discover if there was a creative bond strong enough for an effective collaboration. Chan's thoughts turned to the playwright he had met three months previously – Mark Brownell.

Brownell was a National Theatre School graduate and co-artistic director of the Pea Green Theatre Group with his wife Sue Miner. A member of Tarragon Theatre's Playwright Unit, he had had his satirical plays produced professionally across Canada, and one of them was soon to be published by Playwright's Canada Press. *Monsieur d'Eon* is about the 18th century cross-dressing figure the Chevalier d'Eon de Beaumont, who was involved in espionage at the court of Louis XVI and elsewhere; of him Edmund Burke wrote: "We have several times seen women metamorphosed into men, and doing their duty in the war; but we have seen no one who has united so many military, political, and literary talents".⁸⁵

It would seem Brownell would be a uniquely qualified writer of the opera's woman-dressed-as-a-man character, but he had never attempted writing a libretto, much less anything approaching a musical love story. Chan appreciated Brownell's flair for writing for the common man, though; the openness and direct simplicity of his writing

⁸⁴ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

⁸⁵ Gary Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon Is a Woman*, New York: Basic Books, 1995, p. iii.

and demeanor appealed to him.⁸⁶ His “big, jolly, loud and easy going”⁸⁷ manner – as Chan described it – so different from his own, boded well for a successful collaboration between the two of them.

Chan arranged a meeting at a restaurant in Kensington (in Toronto), and asked the playwright if he would try his hand at a story treatment of *Iron Road*. Brownell was willing to try. The first outline he delivered in June impressed Chan with its focus and its sensitivity to the subject. They quickly discussed a revision and the addition of another scene and another song. Chan could see that Brownell was able to sift through the rich history of the period and bring out the human elements needed for believable dialogue.⁸⁸ He was also a fast and concentrated writer. A second draft was to be prepared for the following week.

By June 17, 1997 Chan knew it was time to formalize the partnership. Chan, Brownell and Strongman met in the Tapestry offices. Also in attendance was general manager Claire Hopkinson, the person responsible for raising much of the money for Tapestry’s budget. The two from Tapestry were impressed with the collaboration; they recognized that Brownell was the most suitable writer for the job. They gave the two collaborators the go-ahead, and advanced five hundred dollars to Brownell for his work.⁸⁹ A Chinese-Canadian composer and a white Canadian writer had formed the partnership that would bring the opera to life. Theirs was an example of a cooperation between two

⁸⁶ Chan Ka Nin’s personal notes.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

members of different races who worked as total equals – a state of affairs that might have seemed improbable if not impossible a century before.

18. CPR: Chinese Railway Workers

When Andrew Onderdonk had employed all the Chinese workers he could from Oregon and California, his next supply came from Hong Kong. Two ships carrying one thousand workers each were chartered in the winter of 1881-82; the workers had been hired through the Lian Chang Company.⁹⁰ During 1882, ten more shiploads of Chinese arrived, about six thousand workers in all, who had been procured through agents of the Six Companies of Guandong; they were then taken to the Fraser Valley work sites.⁹¹

The Chinese labourers were organized initially into mobile work gangs comprised of thirty men, headed by a white foreman, or what was then called a “herder.”⁹² Once the individual gangs were settled into camps, they were assigned a cook, a cook’s assistant and a bookman.

The bookman occupied an intermediary position of power between the white bosses and the Chinese workers. Hired for his knowledge of some English and bookkeeping, his primary duties were collecting wages from the company and paying the workers, representing the work gang to the employer through the herder, and purchasing provisions for the workers at the lowest possible price. This last responsibility arose because the Chinese had to pay for their own food supplies, along with camping

⁹⁰ Anthony B.Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

⁹¹ Berton, *The Great Railway*, p. 204.

⁹² Anthony B.Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

equipment, tools and transportation. Provisions were either purchased from the company store or, preferably, from the more competitively priced local trading houses – if they were available.⁹³ The bookman enjoyed a degree of privilege that did not always turn out to be in the workers' best interests. There were instances of bookmen keeping part of the workers' wages, and one was assaulted for cheating the labourers.⁹⁴

White labourers were paid \$1.50 to \$1.75 per day. Skilled workers received \$2 to \$2.50 and many basic amenities. The Chinese workers, by contrast, were all paid \$1 per day, which in reality was brought down to eighty cents after expenses.⁹⁵ Given that the average daily wage in Guangdong was seven cents a day, the relatively large wage for work on the railway held the promise that a worker could in theory save three hundred dollars after four or five years of working on the Onderdonk sections. Such a sum would mean he would be self-sufficient on his return to China.⁹⁶

However, the food supplied for them to purchase barely met minimum requirements. The labourers' diet consisted mostly of stale ground salmon and boiled rice, rarely supplemented by vegetables or fruit. White labourers did not have to pay for their cooking utensils or food, and ate fresh meat and vegetables while the Chinese labourers could not afford to buy better food as they had to be very careful with their expenses.⁹⁷ With the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables, the Chinese camps consequently

⁹³ Anthony B.Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 63

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-66.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁹⁶ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, p. 360.

⁹⁷ Anthony B.Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

suffered from scurvy. There was little remedy to be had from the few doctors there were in the Fraser Valley. Nearly two hundred Chinese died from scurvy during their first year on the work sections. That caused a panic in the town of Yale because the citizens thought the new arrivals were dying of smallpox.⁹⁸

The Chinese were at first set to the job of grading, which consisted of cutting out hills and filling ravines and gullies. Meanwhile, as the work grew more dangerous with the carving of galleries (ledges cut into the rock faces) and with the excavating of tunnels, the fatalities among the white crews mounted. It was growing more difficult for the bosses to persuade men to do the hazardous jobs of blasting and tunnel digging where there was an ever-present danger of explosions and rock falls. The hospital in Yale was so crowded with the victims of accidents in the first six months of work on Onderdonk's railway sections that it had to be rebuilt and enlarged to accommodate them all.⁹⁹ First-nation labourers were relatively fearless in climbing the rock walls and handling explosives, but they had a way of disappearing after payday. That dangerous work eventually fell to the Chinese, leaving the white workers to the safer work of cutting timber, constructing bridges and laying track.¹⁰⁰

The job of blasting was tedious and riddled with danger. In the first year of work, less than one mile of railway grade was laid. At times, the track bed advanced less than six feet per day. The toll in human lives was high. While white workers also suffered injuries and deaths, those were widely reported and lamented. The maiming and deaths of

⁹⁸ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, p. 363.

⁹⁹ Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 193.

¹⁰⁰ Anthony B.Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

Chinese, by contrast, went mostly unreported or were given only brief mention.

According to notes from an engineer's journal:

August 13 1880 – A Chinese drilling on the ledge of a bluff near Alexandra Bar is killed when a stone falls from above and knocks him off.

August 19 – A log rolls over an embankment and crushes a Chinese to death at the foot of a slope.

September 4 – A Chinese killed by a rock slide.

September 7 – A boat upsets in the Fraser and a Chinese is drowned.

September 11 – A Chinese is smothered to death in an earth cave-in.¹⁰¹

Blasting work often consisted of climbing down ropes to drill holes in rock faces.

The workers would sometimes be suspended in baskets, working in bare feet for better footing, then planting the blasting powder, or worse, the notoriously unstable nitroglycerine that could be set off by a mere knock. Such was the demand for explosives that Onderdonk built a factory near Yale, which, when in full production, produced the four thousand pounds of explosives a day that were required for the constant explosions blasting up and down the canyons day and night.¹⁰² Every day, men were killed or injured by the explosives that were often carelessly handled. Whether through fatigue or poor nutrition, an air of fatalism sometimes overcame the workers which led to incidents such as one in which barrels of black powder were seen being unloaded beside the river by labourers dropping them from wagons into barges with nothing but a bale of hay to catch

¹⁰¹ Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 202.

¹⁰² Berton, *The Great Railway*, p. 198.

them.¹⁰³ White workers carrying explosives were overheard joking morbidly that though it might be a warm day for working, chances are they might be a lot warmer that night because they could have been blown “to hell” by the time the day was through.¹⁰⁴ Pipe smokers sometimes suffered from flash burns because they would light up their pipes while their hands were covered with blasting powder.¹⁰⁵ Puddles of nitroglycerine and spills of blasting powder would be set off by horses’ hooves, killing animals and men.

Not only did explosions claim lives – often from failure to warn of upcoming explosions - but also death and injury were often caused by the after effects of the dynamiting: rocks raining from the sky, rockslides and dislodged boulders, cave-ins and the ever-present danger of powder burns. So numerous were the fatalities that the *Yale Sentinel* somewhat reservedly commented “[N]ot even Chinamen [*sic*] should be unnecessarily exposed to injury or loss of life.”¹⁰⁶ Exhaustion from the hard work and the long walks between camps took the lives of others.¹⁰⁷ In addition to the danger of being buried alive in tunnels or drowning in the Fraser from bridge-collapses and landslides, the Chinese had to deal with the unfamiliar Canadian winter. Because of the harsh weather, many of them were laid off and left to fend for themselves in the towns and camps along

¹⁰³ Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 191.

¹⁰⁴ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, p. 174.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

¹⁰⁷ Harry Con, et al. *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada*, ED. Edgar Wickberg, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1982, p. 23.

the line for three months at considerable cost to their savings until they were rehired in the spring.¹⁰⁸

White foreman whose neglect caused the accidental deaths of Chinese workers were faced with angry mobs who knew they could not trust the legal system to protect them by launching inquiries into accidents. White bosses and the occasional bookman that treated the workers unfairly or cheated them of their wages were the object of riots. Foremen were physically assaulted and repayment demanded when called for.¹⁰⁹

The regard for the Chinese on the job site contrasted with the prejudice and indifference they had received on their arrival in Victoria. Though the conditions of their employment were harsh, everyone, from Andrew Onderdonk down through the ranks, that dealt with the Chinese on the job, generally praised them for their work ethic and honesty.¹¹⁰ That was not say that the men from Guangdong were not quick to stand up for what few rights they had. Berton speculates that those particular labourers were less inclined to tolerate abuse, because Guangdong had a long history of disaffection with the Chinese capital.¹¹¹ The southern provinces were traditionally a seat of rebels.¹¹² In one incident, a Chinese work gang was paid one cent less for each worker than they had

¹⁰⁸ Anthony B.Chan, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

¹¹⁰ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, pp. 200-201.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹¹² Anthony B.Chan, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-38.

agreed upon, so they stormed the payroll office and were quickly given what they were owed. They then returned peaceably to the job.¹¹³

For Andrew Onderdonk, the employment of the nearly fifteen thousand Chinese over the five-year period of his construction contracts saved him an estimated three to five million dollars,¹¹⁴ and assuredly saved his company from bankruptcy.¹¹⁵

19. *Iron Road*: Revision and Workshop

Brownell and Chan experimented with different configurations of characters, adding some and dropping others. Chan said there was some trial and error with antagonists and protagonists.

As we had the basic story, initially we tried it one way and then we tried it another. So we looked at the whole picture. One time, we had the daughter and the father, and then we had Nichol and his father, and his father is bad.... Lai Gwan's father was a good guy at one point, but it's kind of too symmetrical. It changed in various ways. I think we had the father being a good guy and then there was another bookman. The father is not the bookman. There's another bookman, and he's the bad guy. Later, we combined the two so the father is also the bookman. It changed every so often.¹¹⁶

The remainder of 1997 sped by as the momentum of the work on *Iron Road* built up. Act I, scene 1 was completed and performed at Chan's home. Finished pieces were now falling into place, and specific scored scenes were being gradually refined. Financing

¹¹³ Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 361.

¹¹⁴ Anthony B.Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹¹⁵ Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 206.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

and a production time line were planned; Brownell was to receive seven thousand dollars for completion of the libretto, and Chan was to receive twenty-one thousand.

The next year, 1998, was marked by more intensive workshopping and several readings. The beginning of the year found Chan concentrating on the epilogue of the opera. He was not satisfied with the “Remember the Dead” aria for the conclusion, believing it did not work. By March 1st, Brownell had completed his first full draft of *Iron Road*.

The method by which Chan and Brownell worked was sometimes script based and sometimes music based. Chan had made use of the time over the years while working with potential librettists to compose much of the music; so, consequently, he had a lot of sizable quantity material to draw upon when it came to refining the opera with Brownell:

There was a good deal of music written between 1991 to 1997. I tried to salvage some of the music whenever possible. That brought up an interesting question: did the music come first, or the text? In retrospect, it worked either way. So when someone pointed out, ‘Wow, your music fitted perfectly with the text,’ I was dumbfounded, because the music had originally been written to fit another line of text.¹¹⁷

Chan regarded it as a compliment that the result was sometimes perceived as seamless. He said he and Brownell usually proceeded with Brownell writing the text and dialogue and Chan writing music on top of it. There was not necessarily any one way that was easier than another. At times the two creators fed off each other:

Sometimes when I have the text, I would write a melody that I would not have come up with otherwise, without the text. So that is inspiring. You know, the phrasing, the tone, the

¹¹⁷ Chan Ka Nin’s personal notes.

shape. And then sometimes I say 'Mark, I'm going to write something and you put in the text later,' because I felt the music is going that way. A lot of the time, too, usually when I catch one of his words that just sounded right, I would want more of that, so sometimes I would write the music and then ask him to put in more words. Sometimes he would simply add a stanza, and then I would set the music.¹¹⁸

One way in which Brownell showed that he was different from the previous writers was the relative latitude he allowed himself with the potentially politically sensitive treatment of the story. He perhaps enjoyed a degree of license as a white Canadian in writing freely of such historical figures as Sir John A. Macdonald who he has admitting at one point in the opera that he is drunk. According to Chan, the previous writers felt somewhat inhibited in their portrayal of the white characters, whereas Brownell could treat them in a humorous way. Chan has commented:

Regarding the story line, it goes so many ways. Sometimes you paint the white workers to be the bad guys only. Actually, strange enough, before Mark, they [the writers] were all Chinese writers. In their way, they never dared to poke fun at [Sir] John A. Macdonald. If they had taken the job, they wouldn't paint the white workers as cardboard politicians just coming into having profits. So in a way, with Mark, he has the freedom to do what he wants.¹¹⁹

June 3, 1998, was an exciting and busy day for the creative team because there was a full-length studio reading at Tarragon Theatre with six actors to liven up the script and to provide feedback. A studio reading is an opportunity for a writer to hear the words made flesh. Often there are valuable insights revealed about character dynamics. To help Brownell with working in the-to-him relatively unfamiliar genre of opera, Chan lent him

¹¹⁸ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

a song method book later that summer so he could familiarize himself with opera traditions.

The fall of 1998 was dedicated to honing the scenes of Act I. With the increasing attention *Iron Road* needed and the stepping up of production preparations, the large-scale opera was demanding much of his time. Chan found that he had to put aside some of his other commitments, mainly works to be performed by the Gryphon Trio and Amici Music Ensemble. Chan was now completely immersed in his opera and more than ever eager to see it through to completion.

The opera's concluding lament, "Remember the Dead," along with Act I, scenes 1 and 2, received a workshop in the fall with the MacMillan Singers and the Xiao Ping Chorus. That was the first time any of the opera's Chinese lyrics were sung by a Chinese choral group. *Iron Road* was the first time Chan had set music to a text written intensively in Chinese that was not a classic literary text. The opera was shaping up very much through a process of experimentation and cross-cultural influence:

I've never written a Cantonese song before. Initially, there was just a lot of pentatonic and some modulation. Later on, there is even some chromatic passages using Cantonese, so it was just an experiment. Then there was some Irish or folk song or work song from the white workers, so that would be western...Musically, there are themes, there's orchestration, there's the instruments that suggest both cultures. Near the end, when the railway is almost finished, so on stage when we have the "Iron Dragon" coming, and the white workers and the politicians welcoming the train, the Chinese workers are also trying to sing what they perceive what's happening, so there's a mix of East and West, a kind of dialogue in that scene.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

Patrons of the arts were expressing interest in Chan and Tapestry's opera project, and the composer had the opportunity to present pieces at various gatherings at private homes. Interest from arts group donors coincided with a huge boost from the Canada Council Millennium Fund in December, when Tapestry received two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to develop the opera. It was a gratifying Christmas present to end 1998.

February 1999 had Strongman, Brownell and Chan working on Act II, Scene 3, revising it many times. Another sticking point was the two lovers' first encounter, which caused much discussion. Up to then, Chan and Brownell were still using the working name of "Mulan" for the female lead. They struggled with how to have the brusque foreman Nichol relate to the female lead in her disguise as a man. As the despised "herder", Nichol would have to come across as having some redeeming qualities, if the love affair were to seem at all plausible. Eventually, after they had workshopped the aria "Beautiful is the East", Brownell and Chan found a Chinese saying that provided them with an analogy that suggested a way to set the tone for Nichol and "Mulan's" [Lai Gwan's] relationship. It is said that water (woman) wears down the rock (man) and streams can carve up entire mountains; that is how "Mulan" [Lai Gwan] would relate to Nichol, the hard "herder." Those elemental qualities would form the basis of the characters.¹²¹

Preparations of scenes and excerpts for a cultural showcase in Vancouver were made April 21, and by June, an Iron Road Advisory Group had formed and held a production meeting at the West Tower of Toronto City Hall. The following week, Chan

¹²¹ Chan Ka Nin's personal notes.

attended a Tapestry board meeting to make a presentation of the opera synopsis to that company's governing members who were now facing a commitment to a rather large and expensive undertaking. Chan was aware that the cost of mounting a full-scale new opera with a full-scale orchestra entailed huge financial risk.

The very next day, Chan was at work with Brownell and Strongman discussing the intricacies of Nichol and "Mulan's" [Lai Gwan's] arias. In the mid-August, Scenes 1, 2, and 3 from Act II underwent further revision following Leon Major's advice that the opera should concentrate on the two main characters, keeping the workers in the background of the story so as not to create too many loose narrative threads. That advice reflected Major's penchant for emphasis on plot and character development:

"For me, the most important part of the opera is the characters. It's not about concepts...Do we in the audience care about these people?"¹²²

The creative team knew that they had to make the story line simpler, otherwise clarity would be forfeited. Chan said "that in some of the drafts, [the story] does get lost, and then the focus is not clear."¹²³ With much music going on, it would be easy for the opera to become too diffuse, going against what Chan believes is most important:

I think it's the story that will be most important. To tell this story – I hope the audience will understand the text and will stay interested in the music. In a way, it's fun for me to do, because I like to write music that people will appreciate; and, because of the power of

¹²² Leon Major, *Opera World* online, 2002.

¹²³ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

the story line, it is easy to write. Mark provided the text already, so all the emotion, the formal structure is there and it seemed to flow from the words.¹²⁴

By the beginning of September 1999, Chan was finishing the composition of Act I. It was at that time that another important member of the creative team was welcomed. As the language in a sizeable portion of the opera was Cantonese, a translator and lyricist that could act as a language coach was needed to guide the performers once the production got underway. Therefore, Chan organized the commissioning of Wong to translate Brownell's *Iron Road* text into the proper Cantonese dialect. Wong had recently collaborated with Chan on writing some of the lyrics to *Pearl of Asia*, a suite of songs celebrating the return of Hong Kong to China, and his expertise as a lyricist would help smooth the integration of the Cantonese lyrics with the music, and sometimes visa versa. The Cantonese words called for a different setting from the English words, according to Chan:

[The Cantonese parts are] kind of pentatonic, and I thought that seemed to be a natural consequence of the speeches. If you were to make these words intelligible, they tend to form the pentatonic scales, although at times I tend to stretch that and I discovered some other means to go away from these tones, such as shifting the pitch level of a group of words so I have more notes available.¹²⁵

In a discussion with Strongman in October, Chan came to the realization that the music for the end of Act I, recently completed, was "too beautiful."¹²⁶ The heightened

¹²⁴ Shelagh Rogers interview with Chan Ka Nin, CBC Radio, *This Morning*, April 18, 2001.

¹²⁵ Larry Lake interview with Chan Ka Nin, Mark Brownell, and Wayne Strongman, CBC Radio, *Two New Hours*, July 1, 2001.

¹²⁶ Chan Ka Nin's personal notes.

lyricism was too grandiose, too ornate to convey the gritty reality of the labourers' harsh conditions. Chan decided that "more edge [was] needed."¹²⁷ By making the music of the camp scenes more jagged, he would create a greater contrast with the drama of the love story. So, as he was often ready to do, Chan went back to chopping the parts that did not advance the plot. Live studio workshops were especially valuable to Chan, giving him opportunities to have feedback from two channels: "The negative feedback from performers and audience prompted me to make improvements."¹²⁸

The rough time-line for production had been devised with the idea of mounting the opera for the fall of the 2000 season. Tapestry chose the director, Tom Diamond, and introduced him to Chan and Brownell at Strongman's home October 12. Diamond had recently returned from New York, where his production of the debut of *Squonk* was a critical and commercial success. Developing new works was his specialty; he had premièred *The Snow Queen* at the Milk International Children's Festival and *Florence, The Lady with the Lamp* at the Elora Festival – the latter winning a Chalmers Award. As a guest director at several colleges and universities, including the Eastman School of Music, he had experience with both theatre and opera.

Diamond's arrival on the team was the beginning of the final stage of *Iron Road's* creation. Tapestry was now proceeding in high gear towards the production of the opera. All the major problems were close to being solved: a collaborator had been found, the story line had been completed, a translator and language coach had been brought in, and

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

finances were on the way to being put in place. Events were moving rapidly with ever increasing momentum towards the date of the opera's première, a date involving some funding considerations and a myriad of production details.

The director brought the project the necessary unifying influence straight away. His arrival at that stage of the still-coalescing opera was a stroke of luck; Brownell said "Tom was able to come in as a dramaturge and really help Ka Nin and I [*sic*] see the forest for the trees."¹²⁹ Chan has credited Diamond with incorporating more aspects of Chinese culture into the story line as he worked closely with Brownell and George Wong. Certain details, known and assumed by Chan as part of his Chinese upbringing and heritage, were emphasized by Diamond, namely, such aspects as the *Five Elements*, the dragon dance, and obvious references to family tradition. The result was that more Cantonese text was added – a challenge that, according to Chan, George Wong met with "vivid translations."¹³⁰

A presentation of the revised Act I, Scene 1, part of Scene 2, and the ending of Scene 3, along with the well-received aria "Beautiful is the East" was made at the Elgin Theatre for potential corporate sponsors. That was the theatre where the opera would eventually make its debut. Diamond, Wong, Brownell, Chan and producer Claire Hopkinson all met at Strongman's before Christmas to discuss a draft completed December 8. (So many drafts had been gone through that the team chose to denote them by date rather than number.) Now that the opera was rapidly taking shape, the early

¹²⁹ Larry Lake interview with Chan Ka Nin, Mark Brownell, and Wayne Strongman CBC Radio, *Two New Hours*, July 1, 2001.

¹³⁰ Chan Ka Nin's personal notes.

estimates for the première were proving to be unrealistic. In January 2000, it was realized that another year at least would be needed for its completion. The date was changed from the fall of 2000 to January 2001.

The year 2000 was marked by a succession of fundraising galas and dinners where the more solidified scenes and arias were presented. With a projected budget of over a million dollars, the production would stretch the modest resources of Tapestry to the utmost, and keep producer Claire Hopkinson searching for funding ideas. The extensive campaign to gather funds was augmented by the founding of the *Iron Road* Committee, co-chaired by pianist Angela Chan and Sylvia Morawetz, an active and involved Tapestry board member and then president and board chair. It was George Wong that introduced Angela Chan to the project. The Committee raised money by such things as a “friend raising” dinner where potential patrons heard selections from the opera-in-progress, which garnered enthusiastic support.

For a company like Tapestry, funding comes from a myriad of means. Operating funds come from the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Arts Council. Production funding is usually one-third private sector, one-third government and public sector and the remaining third comes from box office revenue and subscription sales. The private sector is made up of individual donors, foundations and corporations. AT&T Canada tied in their sponsorship of *Iron Road* with an adroit publicity campaign announcing the laying of their fibre-optic network in Canada, the so-called “glass road.”¹³¹ *Iron Road* was a particularly challenging production because a new, untried

¹³¹ David Perlman, *Whole Note Magazine*, April 1 – May 7, 2001.

large-scale opera is always exceptionally risky. Many theatre and opera companies will share the risk by co-producing with other companies that may have their own venue and audience base. According to Strongman, it is not unusual for Tapestry to not have full funding in place until only just before a production, and the company always has two or three production budgets that are matched to revenue expectations. As each cut-off date is passed, the budget will be revised accordingly.¹³²

The project received a boost in support when Senator Vivienne Poy invited Strongman to conduct excerpts from the opera at the Chinese Canadian Heritage Fund launch in Vancouver. Thereafter, Senator Poy, MLA Henry N.R. Jackman and the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, Hilary M. Weston, became honorary patrons of the opera project.

Back in Toronto, members of the Chinese community volunteered to help with consultation, fundraising and marketing. Chan had always been aware that the potentially sensitive nature of an interracial love story, set against the background of the harsh treatment of Chinese CPR workers, might offend the Chinese community. Some of the feedback he received complained that the Chinese characters “kowtow to the *gweilo* [white man]” and that it wasn’t acceptable that the Chinese bookman, Manli, should at first be a hard taskmaster of his own people.¹³³ Chan was acutely concerned that there would be major protests such as that the Toronto production of *Showboat* received when African-Canadians demonstrated and protested against what they felt was the demeaning

¹³² Cathleen Bond interview with Chan Ka Nin, *Canadian Arts & Culture*, 2001.

¹³³ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

portrayal of people of African descent. Chan kept the Chinese-Canadian community in mind when creating *Iron Road*, and, as it was with fundraising and other matters surrounding the opera, “we were concerned, because some people who we thought would support our project didn’t support our project.”¹³⁴

Fundraising continued under the inspired direction of Claire Hopkinson as the opera continued to evolve. By April 11, 2000, at a meeting at Chan’s to discuss *The Dream* scene and the bookman’s entrance, it was settled once and for all that the lead female character had a permanent name; she was now “Lai Gwan,” no longer labeled as being a “Mulan”-like figure. Thanks to Brownell’s work, she was at last a distinct, fully rounded character.

The *Iron Road* project was attracting increasing interest from other arts-related organizations. After a workshop of the complete opera was planned for the end of the summer, Chan met with representatives at the Royal Ontario Museum to plan promotion of the opera through a display there that would be concurrent with the performance run of the opera. In that same month of April, there were discussions about an option for filming the opera with an independent producer. Much headway had been made on Act II, specifically on *The Dream*, *The Fight* and *The Tunnel Mouth* scenes. Chan was feeling quite positive about the progress, though he was looking at reworking Act I for September’s workshop.

In the midst of the exciting headway being made and with so much to look forward to, Chan again suffered a personal setback: on July 16, his father died. The news

¹³⁴ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

hit him hard. His father had had reservations about Chan going into music professionally after dropping out of electrical engineering. The composer had had high hopes that his father would see the finished opera, with its emphasis on the Chinese culture that his father so admired and its story of Chinese immigrants in the New Land. Perhaps, by having his father see *Iron Road*, Chan could have shown him how much he appreciated his sacrifices in coming to Canada in 1965 from Hong Kong. The opera would be something like a memorial to his father's "sense of virtue and righteousness"¹³⁵ that Chan has said he had only come to appreciate only in recent years. Regret and grief weighed on Chan that summer of 2000, but the opera demanded attention. There could be no wavering in his resolve to see it finally on stage.

20. CPR: Financial Difficulty

Chinese labour not only saved Onderdonk from bankruptcy by cutting his costs by twenty-five percent; it quite possibly also saved the railway itself, for time and money were running out for both Onderdonk and the Canadian Pacific Railway Company. If the engineer was to complete his contracts, he would need an additional two and a half million dollars.¹³⁶ By June 1882, while the other section of the railway line was racing across the prairies and quickly approaching the mountains, Onderdonk had advanced less than twenty miles of track through the difficult Rocky Mountain terrain. It had taken

¹³⁵ Chan Ka Nin's personal notes.

¹³⁶ Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 206.

eighteen months for his workers just to blast and dig out the first two miles from his base at Yale.¹³⁷

Part of the problem was inefficient use of labour. Onderdonk's operation was at times wasteful in its use of Chinese manpower. A government engineer reported that in general the labourers were not being well directed. One visitor to the work sections noted that forty Chinese were being used to pull a wagon when four mules could have done the job at less cost.¹³⁸

Onderdonk was finally forced to hire a general manager by the name of Michael Haney to tighten up the operations. Haney had the reputation of being an innovative cost cutter, and had organized the means by which he could inspect up to a hundred miles of track per day by using relays of horses.¹³⁹ He came and tightened up discipline and devised ways for the speedier delivery of supplies and bridge materials. While Onderdonk refused to interfere with the affairs of his Chinese workers, Haney was in daily contact with them, and was particularly impressed with the honesty the Chinese showed in living up to their contracts. He saw too how they regarded death on the work site. In one incident, he came across Chinese refusing to work in the presence of a dead body. One of the workers had been killed in a fall down the canyon and the body was unrecoverable, but still within sight of the workers. The foreman was arguing with a First Nations man who wanted to charge ten dollars to remove the body. Haney told the foreman to never mind the cost and to pay what was asked. The First Nations man disposed of the body

¹³⁷ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, pp. 356-367.

¹³⁸ Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 198.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

later that night by obliterating it with dynamite lowered by rope. The workers returned to the job the next day.¹⁴⁰

Cost-cutting and low wages for Chinese labour were not enough to solve Onderdonk's financial problems. He returned to Ottawa in the fall of 1883 to lobby for another subsidy, and it was while he was in Victoria that he was arrested temporarily by a contractor for non-payment of bills and spent two hours in jail. His friends bailed him out; the Canadian Pacific Railway Company would end up needing a similar last-minute bail out from the government.¹⁴¹

That Onderdonk did not have deep enough pockets to keep out of trouble was but a pale reflection of the Chinese workers' situation as they struggled to economize and save money in "Gold Mountain" while working on the railroad. Paid about \$25 per month when employed, the labourer faced a three-month layoff in the winter. Regular expenses left a worker with \$43 after a year of working on the railway, according to an 1885 Royal Commission on Chinese labour hiring practices.¹⁴² Then there was the debt to be repaid for the overseas passage to Canada which typically cost about \$40 for the one-way ticket. The companies, known as the Six Companies of Guangdong, that handled employer contracts and the workers' transportation received 2.5% of their wages, on top of the ticket money.¹⁴³ Plainly, such expenses made it difficult for the workers to save much money.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹⁴¹ Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 208.

¹⁴² Anthony B.Chan, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁴³ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, p. 360.

Few women made the trip across the sea to the New Land because of the emphasis on bringing in able-bodied men to build the railway. Many of the men even preferred that arrangement. Married men did not want to bring their families with them, preferring to become somewhat established before sending for wives and children.¹⁴⁴ Many men intended to return home, or, as in some cases, married second wives in Canada.

Canadian immigration laws restricted the entry of Chinese by the leveling of a fifty-dollar head tax in 1885 after the railway was built, severely curtailing the immigration of families. (The head tax had gradually increased to five hundred dollars by 1904, and Chinese immigration was prohibited outright from 1923 to 1947.)¹⁴⁵ In any case, there was little incentive to bring over wives and children, a situation partly fostered by Confucianism that held women responsible for maintaining village ties and taking care of the family unit that included elderly parents-in-law and children. Thus, the strictly defined role of Chinese women meant few wives came overseas with their husbands.¹⁴⁶

From the time in April 1858 that Chinese gold-seekers came to Victoria, where a tent village was set up overnight to accommodate the five hundred men, there was a tendency for the Chinese to band together because of the suspicion and race-hatred the gold-seekers had experienced in California. The racial tension was a further discouragement for the immigrants from bringing their families over, only to expose them to hostility. By the fact the men did not have their families with them to enable them to

¹⁴⁴ Harry Con, et al. *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada*, ED. Edgar Wickberg, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1982, p. 14.

¹⁴⁵ Jin Guo, *Voices of Chinese Canadian Women*, Toronto: The Women's Book Committee, Chinese Canadian National council, 1992, p. 17.

carry on normal lives, the large camps populated by Chinese males seemed to be that much

more foreign to the whites and thereby increased the distrust of and prejudice felt towards the Chinese workers. It was surmised that the Chinese knew nothing of filial love because of the few Chinese families to be seen.¹⁴⁷ Many of the workers were concentrating on saving money to take back with them to China and, lacking the intention of remaining in the New Land, many did not even try to learn English – which further helped to ensure their isolation from others.¹⁴⁸

By the summer of 1884, the Great Railway had used up every cash reserve and subsidy and was still not completed. The work needed to lay track north of Lake Superior was extraordinarily expensive because of the fill needed to create a firm footing on the muskeg, and because the slow progress made blasting through the hard granite of the Canadian Shield equaled the painfully slow progress of blasting a way through from the Fraser Valley. The company had spent eight million dollars alone in the first ten months of 1884. In desperation, the company waited for salvation from the government. Sir John A. Macdonald had been the railway's supporter from its early days, but now he was inclined to delay further decisions because he was facing objections from his own cabinet.

¹⁴⁶ Jin Tan and Patricia E. Roy, *The Chinese in Canada*, Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1985, p. 5.

¹⁴⁷ Berton, *The Last Spike*, p. 195.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

The CPR faced the repayment of a debt due by July 10 that it would not be able to meet unless help was at hand.¹⁴⁹

Rescue came by means of an unlikely figure. Louis Riel had been out of Canadian politics since 1875, but increasing protests over Ottawa's treatment of the First Nations people and the breaking of promises made to the Metis and Cree led to the Saskatchewan Rebellion with Riel at its head. On March 24, 1885, the railway's general manager, William Van Horne, offered to send troops to the scene of the revolt over the tracks of the not yet completed railway. The rebellion was suppressed.

Having demonstrated the strength of the railway in its being able to move 3,324 soldiers to the conflict in nine days – a task that would have taken three or more weeks in pre-railway days¹⁵⁰ – the company watched the deadline for its debt approach with the hope that the government would express its gratitude and prove its confidence in the railway. The first four hundred thousand dollars of the debt was due at 3 p.m. on July 10. At 2 p.m. of that day, in the House of Commons, a majority voted in favour of a bill to relieve the railway.¹⁵¹ The railway was finally in the clear and could now be completed.

21. *Iron Road*: Audition, Rehearsal and Première

In the year 2000, *Iron Road* was also reaching its final stages of its creation as funding for the production advanced and the first steps in casting were initiated. In May, hundreds of performers auditioned for the lead roles and two choruses, and by August 28

¹⁴⁹ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, p. 432.

¹⁵⁰ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, pp. 443-476.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 485-489.

the callbacks for the choruses had been held. Tapestry had now set April 20 for the date of the première. Casting was finalized by February 2001.

One of the biggest challenges was finding a young soprano for the part of Lai Gwan. The search had already taken two years.¹⁵² The part, after all, demanded “dramatic intensity and ... vocal stamina.”¹⁵³ Chan’s score encompassed a wide vocal range in English and Cantonese, and Strongman was looking for a woman who “radiated the indomitable courage of Lai Gwan.”¹⁵⁴ She had to look the part. According to Strongman, there was a high level of complication in casting such racially specific roles:

You know, first of all, opera as a genre tends to be colour blind and that would not traditionally be an issue, but here because of the authenticity, this is very much the story of a group of people who came from a very impoverished world and Cantonese was their language. That’s how they communicated with each other, and so we really set out to find, first of all in our principal characters, those who could, if you can imagine – this is a tall order – sing intelligibly, speak intelligibly in Cantonese with its nine inflected endings, sing in a western style so they could cut across Ka Nin’s romantic orchestration, and also have the acting ability to carry off a drama of significant technique. I mean, Zhu Ge Zeng [cast as Lai Gwan] has to be a believable boy.¹⁵⁵

It was through the well-respected *erhu* player George Gao, a featured performer in *Iron Road*’s orchestra, that the soprano Zhu Ge Zeng was brought into contact with the company. She had immigrated to Canada from Hunan province in China in 1989, studied at McMaster University for a degree in music performance, and undertaken voice and

¹⁵² Larry Lake interview with Chan Ka Nin, CBC Radio, *Two New Hours*, July 1, 2001.

¹⁵³ *Globe and Mail*, April 19, 2001.

¹⁵⁴ Tapestry Press Release, February 20, 2001.

¹⁵⁵ Larry Lake interview with Chan Ka Nin, CBC Radio, *Two New Hours*, July 1, 2001.

opera studies at Wilfred Laurier University. She had four notable opera performances to her credit when Gao urged her to audition for *Iron Road*. “It was serendipity,” said Strongman.¹⁵⁶

The role of James Nichol, the foreman who becomes Lai Gwan’s doomed love, was landed by a Canadian-born tenor who has an international reputation in new operatic roles. Stuart Howe had recently come from singing the lead in Louis Applebaum’s *Erewhon*. Baritone Zheng Zhou was cast as Lai Gwan’s father, the bookman Manli. Among other operas, Zheng had been in three by Philip Glass. Vancouver-based mezzo-soprano Grace Chan was chosen to create the role of Ama, Lai Gwan’s mother.

The fall of 2000 was a hectic time of workshops, including a whole run-through of Act I and II in a studio. The endings of the Acts I and II underwent slight changes. By October 19, the entire production team met for the first time at Tapestry. On November 6, set designer Dany Lyne presented her set model and plans, with her designs looking like what Strongman described as “Chinese paintings”¹⁵⁷; reviewer Christopher Hoile commented on a “huge red-lacquer cut-out that sets the first scene in China” as being “visually stunning.”¹⁵⁸

Revising *The Camp* scene (Act I, Scene 6) and Manli’s scene (Act II, Scene 3) occupied Chan, Brownell, Strongman and Diamond for the rest of that month. The New Year saw Strongman and Chan going over every detail of the complete scores at Chan’s

¹⁵⁶ Tapestry Press Release, February 20, 2001.

¹⁵⁷ Larry Lake interview with Chan Kan Nin, Mark Brownell, and Wayne Strongman, CBC Radio, *Two New Hours*, July 1, 2001.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

home. A February 16 concert of Chan's work that included an excerpt from the opera was favourably reviewed by The Toronto Star. The première was looming closer and on March 12 there was an orchestral reading of *Iron Road*. Opera rehearsals began a week later.

If music director and conductor Strongman and producer Claire Hopkinson had reservations about the risks in undertaking such a large and expensive production, one of Tapestry's largest to date, they were laid to rest by the second week of rehearsals. Strongman said he underwent the kind of exhilaration that happens infrequently even with productions of established operas, and that it came from seeing the opera take on a life of its own. He said it was no longer a matter of trying to figure out how the various pieces and elements could fit together:

I was no longer aware of the size of the piece – I was more aware that the work of art itself had lifted us and had become its own entity. It had, in fact, defined itself and was telling us where it would go, which was an extraordinary experience – to be swept along like that. It's so rare, you know, in my experience anyway, to have that experience even with existing works.¹⁵⁹

Part of the reason for the opera's falling into place in rehearsal was the emotional involvement and commitment of the Chinese chorus. Knowing it was a story that had not been told before made the level of dedication intensely high.¹⁶⁰ The rehearsal process itself represented a little of the dynamics of Chinese-Canadians and Caucasian-Canadians working together. When the "Chinese chorus" and the "CPR chorus" first came in to the

¹⁵⁹ Howard Dyck interview with Cha Ka Nin, et al., CBC Radio, *Saturday Afternoon at the Opera*, November 24, 2001.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

hall, tenor Stuart Howe noticed everyone at first tended to sit in “their own little groups for a while.”¹⁶¹ Mezzo-soprano Grace Chan said that those Chinese born in China and those Chinese born in Canada shared the same mindset when it came to the Chinese value of saving face, particularly in a working situation with director Tom Diamond:

When the director says something and we know it’s wrong, well, a Canadian would say ‘No, you’re wrong.’ The Chinese people will just mumble among themselves, ‘He’s wrong,’ and we’re not going to tell him that, because he might be embarrassed in front of everybody. Then Tom would say, ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ And then we go, ‘Well, we didn’t want to say it in your face.’ Looking back, it’s very humorous, because those are different styles of relating.¹⁶²

Chan found that the period of the few weeks leading up to the première was the most exciting time in the whole creative process, and he goes so far as to say it was possibly the most exciting time of his life. He saw a hundred people working on his creation on and off stage every day, and the characters he and Brownell had created were now coming to life. “All my hardship and frustration evaporated at the end,” said Chan.¹⁶³

Held simultaneously with the preparations leading up to the première was Tapestry’s *Iron Road* Education Program aimed at Grade 7 to high school. The *Iron Road* project and the company’s program of introducing young audiences to the opera form fitted perfectly with the Ontario school curriculum for teaching about the building of

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Howard Dyck interview with Cha Ka Nin, Grace Chan, and Stuart Howe, CBC Radio, *Saturday Afternoon at the Opera*, November 24, 2001.

¹⁶³ Chan Ka Nin’ personal notes.

the CPR, the history of the Chinese in Canada, and cultural diversity. With a Canada Millennium Partnership Program Grant, an *Iron Road* website was set up to link the production with cultural and historical organizations. Two Toronto schools were chosen as pilot projects under the education program to present their own music theatre productions: Northview Heights Secondary School mounted its *Journey to Gold Mountain*, December 14, 2000, and Winona Drive Senior Public School produced *Railway Ties and Broken Dreams*, January 25, 2001.

At a cost equivalent to three years of Tapestry's normal operating budget, *Iron Road* opened to a huge advance wave of advance publicity in Toronto. The gala première was given April 20 before a sold-out house that included the Governor-General, Adrienne Clarkson, and the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, Hilary M. Weston. A large measure of the opera's attraction for the Chinese-Canadian community that attended was the portrayal of the immigrants of an earlier time. As one-third of the opera was in Cantonese, surtitles translating the text were projected for the benefit of non-Cantonese speakers. Certainly, too, the historical setting, which appealed to many Canadians who harbour an abiding fascination with the building of the Great Railway, contributed to the opera's success. By drawing in a cross-section of the public that normally does not attend opera, *Iron Road* attracted much attention. It was seen by approximately eleven thousand people in the eight-day run at the Elgin Theatre and heard nation-wide by thousands more on two CBC Radio broadcasts.

The opera received nine nominations for Dora Mavor Moore Awards and won the 2001 Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding New Musical. Producer Claire Hopkinson was one of the winners of the 2001 Chalmers Awards for Arts Administration

in recognition of her fundraising initiatives. Interest in the opera was great. Chin Ka Nin was interviewed by Maclean's Magazine, the CBC, Rogers Cable Network, The National Post newspaper, and twice on TCCBC Chinese Radio. There were subsequent plans to mount productions in Vancouver and other Canadian cities. A production was also being planned for presentation in Hong Kong, the place from where, in the 1880s, so many of the Chinese labourers had set out for the New World.

Touring such a production had been in mind from the start, says Wayne Strongman. "At Tapestry, my partner Claire Hopkinson and I have made it our caveat that with the effort it takes to bring one of these works to the stage, it simply must not end with the première, and so all of our productions are intended to tour."¹⁶⁴

22. The Epilogue: East Meets West

The CPR had been given ten years to build the railway, but it was built in half the time. To create *Iron Road* took twice as long. When the ceremony for "The Last Spike" was completed November 7, 1885, signs were posted up and down the line advising the workers to collect the last of their wages. The sudden completion of the railway meant the dismissal of most of the Chinese labourers. Few had been able to save enough for a return ticket to Guangdong. Census figures from 1891 reveal that following completion of the railway about five thousand men were unable to return to China.¹⁶⁵ Most of them moved to Eastern Canada to find other jobs in saw mills, fishing canneries, coal mines, forestry

¹⁶⁴ Larry Lake interview with Chan Ka Nin, CBC Radio, *Two New Hours*, July 1, 2001.

¹⁶⁵ Berton, *The National Dream: The Last Spike*, p. 363.

and domestic services. Those who could not find work had to depend on the Chinese-Canadian communities and organizations, such as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association.

Approximately six hundred Chinese men died during the building of the Onderdonk sections; four men for every mile of track laid through the rugged canyons.¹⁶⁶ Many of the graves were unmarked. In September 1982, a bronze memorial plaque was erected in Yale in honour of the Chinese workers.¹⁶⁷ Chan Ka Nin's opera can be seen as another memorial, reminding us that a mix of nationalities had contributed to the building of the railway and of the Canadian nation. Just as it took a combination of Chinese and Canadians to help build a railway and a country, it took a combination of Chinese and Canadians, working as a team, to construct the opera, *Iron Road*.

Chan Ka Nin has said that the process of creating the opera was a musical journey into his Chinese heritage, and that he was coming around full circle as he followed Jean Coulthard's advice:

Since I came over here in '65, and especially when I went into composition, I started looking at my roots, looking into myself more. Actually, I learned more about the Chinese and Mandarin in North America. I learned about the Chinese instruments in North America, and I learned about these stories and the discrimination much later in Canada. I also thought it was a circle, because I studied Chinese in Hong Kong and then I never used it for many years, and now doing the opera makes me look back at these words that I've forgotten already. To set it to music seems to be kind of in harmony in my life...I have the Chinese background and I also have the Western training. I seem to be doing

¹⁶⁶ McKee and Klassen, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁶⁷ Julia Ningyu Li compiler and ed., *Canadian Steel, Chinese Grit*, Canadian Steel, Chinese Grit Canada National Executive Committee, 2000, p. 161.

something that makes the best of both worlds. I'm sort of living in these two worlds in a way, and the opera is like that, too.¹⁶⁸

The process of creating the opera led him to re-examine his role as a composer, teacher, husband, father, brother and son. In every sense, *Iron Road* was “my own journey to find myself.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2002.

¹⁶⁹ Chan Ka Nin's personal notes.

CHAPTER II

A Study of Chinese Opera

As mentioned in Chapter I, *The Road to Iron Road*, Chan Ka Nin had started incorporating some distinctly Chinese musical elements into his music prior to composing his first operatic work, which can be seen as a synthesis of all his musical experience. Therefore, for the purpose of identifying those Chinese operatic elements and Chan's application of them to his own work, I shall first explore the standard musical form of Beijing Opera, and its use of orchestral instruments. I shall then examine how the Chinese language relates to the music used in Chinese opera, since there is a similar relationship to be found in *Iron Road*, of which about a third of the libretto is in Cantonese. To avoid confusion, henceforth, the term 'Chinese Opera' will be understood to imply Chinese opera in general

Chinese opera with its rich musical and dramatic expression has been recognized as a distinct performing art for over two hundred years. There are more than 360 different types of opera in China, each of which exhibits characteristics peculiar to the region where it originated, and after which it is named. All the regional opera types share in a common pool of characteristics, sharing perhaps one feature with some regions and not with others, yet possibly sharing another feature with the latter and not with the former. Of all the regional operas, the Beijing Opera (known also as the National Opera) is the most prominent.¹

¹ Elizabeth Wichmann, *Listening To Theatre*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1991, p. xiii.

Elizabeth Wichmann in *Listening To Theatre*, states: “The total performance of Beijing opera presents a kaleidoscopic array of theatrical elements—story, music, voice, movement, makeup, costume, and stage properties. The presence of these numerous elements justifies calling Beijing opera ‘total theatre.’”² These elements of “total theatre”³ are highly integrated, in compliance with the aesthetics of traditional Beijing opera performance practice of which the fundamental aesthetic goal is to convey the essence of life through the display of theatrical skills.⁴ That synthesis of skills is, however, a characteristic of Chinese Opera in general. To the Western eyes the concept of ‘joint artwork’ (song, speech, dance, actions, and symbolic stage design) might at first be thought to mirror Wagner’s concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. However, it would be a mistake to think that the two concepts are exactly alike: the various skills on display in Beijing Opera are solely those of the performers themselves. Wagner’s concept of a ‘total work of art’ envisages a theatrical production in which the arts deployed include all the various arts (music, poetry, song, dance, architecture, sculpture and painting); it is the creation of a team, made up of all those that perform in front of the audience and of all those unseen but intrinsically and creatively involved in the production; in the Chinese concept the production is the creation of a team of performers – the performers on stage and the performers in the orchestra.

² Ibid., p. 1.

³ The term is quoted by Wichmann from E.T. Kirby, “Introduction” to *Total Theatre: A Critical Anthology*, p. xiii.

⁴ Wichmann, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

1. Aural Characteristics/Musical Elements of Chinese Opera

There are three parts to the aural portion of Chinese Opera: song, speech, and orchestra. As elsewhere in the world, music and words are the components of song; in Chinese opera they are paired in speech as well, but are less closely allied than in song – they co-exist but are independent.⁵ All the same both song and speech are dependent upon the stylized vocal skills of the performer and upon the support of the orchestra if they are to be heard at their best. The three major components of the aural part of Chinese Opera might more fittingly be identified as stylized singing, stylized speech, and the percussive orchestra.⁶

The stylized singing of Beijing Opera is based on the two modal systems *xipi* and *erhuang*, known in combination as *pihuang*, which consist of distinctive rhythmic patterns, modal identities, and melodic features. The *pihuang* musical system provides the performer with a fundamental melody, tempo, and rhythm. To a certain extent, these musical elements interrelate; each mode is associated with a certain rhythmic pattern, which then modifies melodic rhythmic development.⁷ Furthermore, there are dramatic implications involved in the *pihuang* musical system; each modal type has its own emotional connotations: *erhuang* is commonly used in nostalgic situations and *xipi* in more lively circumstances.⁸ In most cases, *xipi* and *erhuang* are composed in the form of

⁵ Wichmann, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

⁶ Nancy Yunhwa Rao, *The Role of Language in Music Integration: Poeme Lyrique II by Chen Qigang*, *Journal of Music in China* 2/2, 2000, p. 276

⁷ Wichmann, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁸ Nancy Guy, *Beijing Opera*, *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musician*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

couplets: repeated two-line music to different texts that are selected to fit the requirements of the story being told.⁹

The setting of the Chinese language to the *Pihuang* music system gives rise to those recognizable and typical elaborated features of the Chinese opera singing style – the sliding tones and the long, elaborate melismatic passages, etc. – that benefit the singer as aids in vocal production and emotional expression. Although the mode and rhythmic pattern affect the development of the melodic phrase, it is the Chinese language as it is used in the text that has the greatest influence on the shaping of the music. The way the language is used and its effect upon the music will be discussed in detail later.

Stylized speech, in its function of helping to advance the plot, marks the entrances and exits of characters, recapitulates information given in previous scenes, and conveys plot and character development. Stylized speech with its different degrees of melodiousness is divided into spoken speech and lyrical speech. The former – spoken (*jingbai*) – is a straightforward form of speech, narrative in intent (and hence has no definable musical pitch), while the latter–lyrical (*yunbai*) – is a more expressive, emotional form of dialogue uttered with an exaggerated tonal inflection with musical flavor but no musical pitch. Since spoken speech follows the tonal inflections of the Chinese language more closely than does lyrical speech, it has a narrower pitch range than the latter, which, in its turn, despite having more musical qualities than spoken speech, has a narrower pitch range than that of song. For its “half-sung and half-spoken”¹⁰

⁹ Rulan Chao Pian, *Aria Structural Patterns in the Peking Opera*, Chinese and Japanese music-dramas, 1975, p. 68.

¹⁰ Wichmann quoted in *Listening To Theater from Peking Opera* by Hwang Mei-shu.

quality, lyrical speech might be compared, according to Alban Berg, to *Sprechstimme* – “a spoken melody.” A definition of lyrical speech states that describes its note formation based for aesthetic purposes based on the linguistic tone of the word in Chinese, but that the note, once struck, is immediately slurred as the voice/music rises or falls in pitch.¹¹ That definition suggests a kinship between lyrical speech and German Expressionism.

It is more important in lyrical speech that the meaning of the words be conveyed rather than that pitches relate to the tonal inflections that precede and follow them.¹² Lyrical speech is primarily reserved for the portrayal of characters of higher social status, and its expressive effect is further enhanced by a higher, more literary form of the Chinese language than that of spoken speech which is usually given to characters of the lower social classes.¹³ Differing as its tones do from those of everyday speech, stylized speech (both spoken and lyrical), with its variations of pitch, vowel length, accent and articulation, conveys the meanings of words more potently than does everyday speech, and at the same time embellishes the language.

2. The Effect of the Chinese Language on Melody

a. The Nature of the Chinese Language

Syntactically the Chinese language is made up of single syllable words, pronounced as monosyllables and written as single characters. Each written character

¹¹ Paul Griffiths, *New Grove Music and Musician*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

¹² Wichmann, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

either has a specific meaning of its own, or is combined with other written characters to represent a complete thought unit.

The sound of Chinese, itself, often described as melodious, is characterized by its tonal inflections. It is the tonal nature of the language that has to be carefully considered when music is being set to the text of an aria or a speech, or when words are being set to a pre-existing tune, for the intrinsic musicality of the language itself could clash with the music. Setting words to a pre-existing tune is easier when the text is Chinese classic poetry, which is mostly monosyllabic, than when the text is in contemporary Chinese vernacular language with its many polysyllabic compounds.¹⁴ The challenge in both practices, therefore, lies in marrying the notes of the music with the linguistic tones of the language.

Compared with the other Chinese dialects, Cantonese has a more complex tonal system. Unlike Mandarin, which has only four, Cantonese has seven different tonal inflections that involve different pitch levels with rising and falling inflections. The intrinsic pitch levels and pitch shapes of the words themselves will inevitably shape spoken and musical phrases. While Mandarin has contrasts in stress that are created by light and heavy accents on words, the stresses in Cantonese are created by contrasts in vowel length.¹⁵ Since in Cantonese the contrast in vowel length and in Mandarin the accent of the word tone are already pre-determined by the words of the text, performers, using the scheme with which they are provided by the scriptwriter may have to add more

¹⁴ Rulan Chao Pian, *Text Setting and the Use of Tune Types in Chinese Dramatic and Narrative Music*, American Institute of Indian Studies, Oxford & IBH Publishing Co. PVT.Ltd., New Delhi, 1993, p. 203.

¹⁵ Pian, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

definable musical pitches to create a melodic line.¹⁶ However, in the complex process of fitting text to music, or music to text, there are other factors to be taken into account: the structure of the aria, the connectives for neighbouring tones, the meaning of the words, and the nature of the dramatic situation behind the musical passage. And, the demands do not stop there: the musical setting has to allow room for the performers to compose vocally while on stage and allow them the freedom to add their own aesthetic feelings while interpreting the words and music. All those factors will be discussed below, and will be compared with the way Chan uses the Cantonese dialect in his *Iron Road*.

b. The Creative Process of Text-setting

Unlike the music of the Western opera that is written specifically by a composer, the music of Chinese opera is drawn from pre-existing tunes.¹⁷ That use of pre-existing tunes to provide settings for new texts is a major characteristic of a Chinese opera. Although each tune bears characteristics typical of its region, while travelling from region to region it has been exposed to lending and borrowing, and tailored by performers for their own artistic reasons. Thus, it is a scriptwriter, not a composer, that is responsible for a Chinese opera; and it is he who, choosing tunes drawn from the now anonymous pre-existing material, matches texts with chosen tunes.

Pre-existing tunes are of two kinds: fixed tunes and aria types; the first are borrowed from traditional or popular tunes, the second are characterized by their specific rhythmic patterns, modal identities, and the prescribed melodic and percussive

¹⁶ Bell Yung, *Role of Speech Tones in the Creative Process of Cantonese Opera*, CHINOPERL News, Vol.5, 1975, p. 162.

¹⁷ The anonymous pre-existing tunes traveled from region to region and were borrowed and amended continually.

instrumental preludes and interludes. Even though each aria type is not recorded in written musical notation, it can be identified by its title and musical characteristics. When a scriptwriter needs music for a text, he makes a selection from the pre-existing material in the operatic repertoire, choosing from either the thirty different aria types or from the hundreds of fixed tunes one that fulfils the dramatic needs of the plot. There is a specific method to combining melody and text for each type of pre-existing material. When a fixed tune is selected, the words must be fitted to the music and may be changed while the traditional melody is kept unaltered. Contrariwise, if an aria type is chosen, the music is adapted to the words.

The reason for the difference in the treatment of the two types lies in the built-in flexibility of an aria that allows for modification despite the restrictions. The aria type consists basically of two lines of melody; each line, made up of seven or ten written-characters, that can be repeated and varied according to dramatic need. The rhythmic pattern, modal identity, and the melodic and percussive pattern for the aria type to be performed by the orchestra are noted in the play script.¹⁸ But it is the text that determines the melodic contour of the music because of its fixed number of syllables and prescribed rhythmic pattern. The music of the beginning and ending of the aria will generally remain unchanged; thus, the basic aria can always be recognized. Otherwise, the writer has a degree of freedom that would be denied him, had he selected a fixed tune of which the

¹⁸ Yung, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

music is indeed fixed; in short, a fixed tune dictates the text¹⁹, while the music of an aria type is modified to accord with its text.

However, whether the text accommodates the melody or vice versa, text and melody should begin and end together. The performers' skills now come to the fore: with the clearly labeled music, fixed tune or aria-type, and newly written text as guide, they now have to knit the chosen melody with the given text with little rehearsal or practice, and, also, as if by second nature, speak the language with the correct tones.

Though for dramatic purposes, the text for aria types and fixed tunes are meant to be vessels for the characters' emotions, for aesthetic reasons the linguistic tones of the words must match the chosen melody. In other words, the pitch levels of the linguistic tones and of the music have to correspond to each other, as well as to those that precede and follow them²⁰, and, in so doing, form musical phrases and enhance the meaning of the words.²¹ However, since the linguistic tones of the text (i.e., those of the spoken language) are generally preserved in the process of text setting, the listener can easily understand the sung text.

With the use of connectives between each of the musical pitches, and between linguistic tones and melodic tones, certain techniques, such as sliding tones, melismatic figures, and rhyme, are used to create a sound that is aesthetically satisfying. Sliding tones function as connectives between musical pitches and linguistic tones, and also offer the singer a means of dramatic expression, being used most often in emotional outbursts.

¹⁹ Bell Yung, *Creative Process in Cantonese Opera. II: The t'ien tz'u (text-setting)*, Vol.27/2, 1983, p. 308.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

²¹ Rao, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

Melismatic figures are heard as elaborated pitch connectives in both stylized singing, and stylized speech. Rhyme is found in a type of rhythmic speech used extensively today in Cantonese Opera for both serious and comic roles.²²

In stylized speech, certain patterns of intonation and especially of rhythm appear.²³ The rhythmic structure of a rhymed passage is based on word groupings – mostly in units of three or seven – rather than on metrical regularity (as in Western music). That type of rhythmic structure is found in the traditional Chinese popular entertainment known as *The Beggar's Jingles*²⁴, a rhymed recitation, punctuated by steady beats on wooden clappers. In stylized singing, the use of rhyme provides a subtle connection between musical phrases, and with different rhythmic patterns, creates different dramatic effects.

Although the characteristics of the Chinese languages greatly influence the musical content of Chinese opera, there are times that musical considerations do come first.²⁵ Different factors, such as style, the question of what is best for dramatic effect, etc., determine whether or not musical, rather than linguistic, demands should prevail. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal is threefold: that there be coherence between text and music, that the music enhances the words, and the text the dramatic effect of the music. And yet there is always the chance that the melody will perversely ignore the demands of

²² Rulan Chao Pian, *Aria Structural Pattern in the Peking Opera*, Chinese and Japanese Music-Dramas, 1975, p. 78.

²³ Wichmann, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

²⁴ Pian, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

²⁵ Rulan Chao Pian, *Text Setting and the Use of Tune Types in Chinese Dramatic and Narrative Music*, American Institute of Indian Studies, Oxford & IBH Publishing Co. PVT. Ltd., New Delhi, 1993, p. 205.

the verbal tonal inflections and put the musical demands first – that Chao calls ‘Atonal Composition’.²⁶ In Western opera nowadays an aria has a fixed text and a melody written by the composer, but “the idea of an unalterable melody note for note, does not seem to exist in traditional Chinese dramatic or narrative music.”²⁷

Despite all the scriptwriter’s care in matching text and pre-existing music (fixed tunes and aria types), when it comes to the actual performance, he is no longer the arbiter. Once the performers are on stage, they are in charge and must have the skill and flexibility to transform the linguistic tones of the Chinese language into melody, and be able to embellish the chosen melody with such finer musical details as their ‘artistic instincts’ dictate – abilities which the performer can acquire only after many years of experience.

3. The Orchestra in Chinese Opera

I have written above about the characteristic distinctiveness that singing and speech lend to Chinese Opera. The performers of those skills are not alone, of course, for the orchestra has its own distinctive part to play in the production. It is important in examining Chinese Opera, therefore, to have an overview of the form and function of the orchestra. However, in Chinese Opera the orchestra is clearly divided into two discrete, distinct parts, the melodic and percussive, that are used differently, each retaining its individual identity and playing a specific role – much more so than do the sections of the

²⁶ Pian quoted Chao in her article *Text Setting and the Use of Tune Types in Chinese Dramatic and Narrative Music*, p. 205.

²⁷ Pian, *Text Setting and the Use of Tune Types in Chinese Dramatic and Narrative Music*, p. 205.

Western orchestra which might otherwise be considered to be their equivalent. In short, each part of the Chinese orchestra is itself justly called an orchestra; I shall, therefore, treat the two parts separately.

a. The Melodic Orchestra in Chinese Opera

The melodic orchestra is made up of bowed, plucked, and blown instruments. The bowed are the *jinghu* with a sound that is sharper and in a higher register than that of a violin, and the *erhu*, lower in pitch with a more gentle tone quality, some where between a violin and a viola. The plucked instruments, which are softer and gentler in comparison with the bowed, are the *yueqin*, *ruan*, *sanxian*, and *pipa*, three- or four-stringed instruments, each with its own distinctive sound. The *suona* and *dizi* are the two most frequently used blown instruments— the *suona* for its wide variety of timbres, and the *dizi* for a sound ranging from clear and sweet to high and piercing.

Each instrument of the melodic orchestra is used for specific purposes according to its sound characteristics. Because of the lyrical quality of melodic instruments, the melodic orchestra mostly accompanies singing. The *jinghu*, with its high pitch-register and piercing sound, literally follows the sung melody, although occasionally it is replaced by the *dizi*, which will sometimes serve as leader of the melodic orchestra. The *erhu* and *yueqin* also will provide enhancement and a broader range of tone quality.

The melodic orchestra never performs alone, only with the percussive orchestra. Its major functions are to accompany singing, to play instrumental connectives and to support acting. While accompanying singing, the *jinghu*, the leading melodic instrument, does not follow the vocal line exactly: it either elaborates it with different rhythms, or plays the same melody but in different octaves. The result is a broadening of the pitch-

range of the melody, and an increase in the possible number of variations upon it. The instrumental connectives, which are strictly instrumental, are closely related to the melody. They serve the functions of prelude, interlude, and coda.²⁸

b. The Percussive Orchestra in Chinese Opera

The other instrumental feature of Chinese opera is the percussive orchestra with its five instruments: drum, clapper, large and small gongs, and cymbal. Their parts are characterized by the contrasting timbres created by different linear combinations of the instruments; only rarely do all the percussive instruments play all together.²⁹ The percussive orchestra will enhance dramatic effect by punctuating singing, speech, and movement. Recognizable patterns of rhythm, tempi, timbre, and texture on the percussion will signal the beginning and ending of an opera, and mark scene changes. Such uses of the percussion in Chinese opera can be found throughout Chan's *Iron Road*.

When accompanying singing, the percussive orchestra indicates meter and tempo, and supplies punctuation and an introduction. As an introduction, a percussive passage sets up the melodic instrumental prelude that announces the beginning of an aria. There are numerous rhythmic patterns for such openings, each one expressing a particular emotion. To indicate the desired emotional state, the conductor chooses the rhythm and tempo to be played by the drum and clapper.³⁰ During the aria – or speech – the percussive orchestra beats the punctuation. It may also play the role of a connective to

²⁸ Wichmann, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

²⁹ Rulan Chao Pian, *The Function of Rhythm in the Peking Opera*, Music of Asia (International Music Symposium, Manila, 1966, p. 116.

³⁰ Wichmann, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

highlight a contrast in character and colour between two singing lines that are being sung alternately; and during an aria, it may play a percussive passage interrupting the closing line of a couplet to indicate the advent of the unexpected.³¹

The percussive orchestra accompanies the performers when they are merely speaking. It stresses the speaker's expression by a percussive passage with regular beat counts that interact with a syncopated rhythmic speech to provide a continuous driving force. In addition, it provides irregular rhythmic punctuation on words, phrases, and important moments – “much as intonation is used in English”³² – to highlight emotions and create dramatic effects. Besides supplying such emotional connotations, percussive punctuation serves in spoken dialogue as comma, period, question mark, etc., to mark out the structure of the text; as a result, the meaning of the text is made clear and comprehensible for the audience.³³

Besides punctuating the text, the percussion provides “structural punctuation for the play as a whole.”³⁴ By performing opening, transitional and closing passages, it establishes a clear framework for the whole play. Instead of the raising or opening of a curtain, or the lighting up of the stage that signals a play's start in a Western theatre, a percussive passage will announce the beginning. The percussion will modulate scene changes with transitional passages that clearly mark the ending of one scene and gradually invoke the beginning of the next. As a scene progresses, it will be used to

³¹ Wichmann, *op. cit.*, p. 255.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 257.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

³⁴ *Loc. cit.*

reinforce the overall emotional atmosphere. In fact, music in a Chinese opera does not cease until all the characters have left the stage, and even then it will continue: the percussive orchestra picks up from the last stage moment – whether it be singing, speech or movement – and continues with a closing passage that wraps up the play. The use, then, of the percussive orchestra to mark the beginning and end of an opera, and the transitions from one scene to the next, as well as to punctuate the text, etc. – all are part of the orchestra’s purpose: to weave a continuous fabric of sound.³⁵

In summary, though the melodies and text are chosen and newly ‘composed’ by the scriptwriter, it is the performer that is responsible for the final form of the music of a song. That means that the scriptwriter has to take into account the effect that the text – spoken or sung – might have on the performer’s vocal technique and aesthetic sensibilities.³⁶ In stylized singing, the performers express emotions through the media of the Chinese language and the *Pihuang* musical system, while using their compositional skills to integrate language and music with the aim of making them as affective as possible. In stylized speech, the performers deliver information and gain greater emotional expression through their skillful interpretive use of the Chinese language. Thus, both stylized singing and speech require more than a good understanding of the Chinese language, and an equal sensibility of musical composition.

The orchestra, melodic and percussive, is the other performer in the aural presentation of a Chinese Opera. The melodic orchestra plays instrumental connectives to

³⁵ Wichmann, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

accompany songs, and whether it follows closely or plays apart from the song, it always remains within the *Pihuang* system, as does the song.³⁷ The percussive orchestra always joins the melodic orchestra in supporting songs, by denoting the meter and tempo given by the conductor, and provides punctuation for speech and sound effects for dramatic purposes. By means of a synthetic display of its major components – the Chinese language and *Pihuang* musical system in song, the Chinese language in speech, and the accompanying melodic and percussive orchestras – a Chinese opera in performance paints an aesthetic impression of the very essence of life.

From my examination of the musical structure of Chinese opera, I find that there are two Chinese operatic elements in Chan's *Iron Road*: the setting of a Chinese text to music, and the employment in a dramatic context of a percussive orchestra. According to the composer himself, the Chinese elements in *Iron Road* are based on the knowledge of Chinese music he has acquired as a Western-trained Chinese-Canadian musician.³⁸ I shall examine the way Chan has used those Chinese elements in his opera, and consider how he perceives his own double cultural heritage, and combines the two distinct musical cultures in his music.

³⁷ Wichmann, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

³⁸ Howard Dyck interviewed Chan Ka Nin, et al. CBC Radio, *Saturday Afternoon at the Opera*, November 24, 2001.

CHAPTER III

Setting the Cantonese Text in *Iron Road*

A third of the text of *Iron Road* is, for purpose of authenticity, in Cantonese. For its use of the two languages, English and Cantonese, at times sung simultaneously and at others sung in alternation with some overlaps, *Iron Road* stands out as a unique Canadian opera. It is nothing new that a Canadian opera should contain two or more languages: *Louis Riel* by Harry Somers and librettist Mavor Moore is an earlier example. What makes the text writing in *Iron Road* one of a kind is not merely that a large proportion of it is set in the Cantonese language, but also that the Cantonese text is a translation of Brownell's English text. Although Brownell worked according to an established story line, sketched out earlier by the composer, he had to rise to the challenge of conveying in English the thoughts and values of the Chinese characters that were subsequently to be translated into Cantonese. This unique process involved not only the transformation of thoughts – Chinese values seen through Western eyes and expressed by a Western mind – but also the fusion of the two elements, music and text by the composer.

My intention in this chapter is to examine the relationship between music and Cantonese text in *Iron Road*, to compare the setting of its Cantonese text with the setting of text in Chinese opera, and to examine the way text and music work together in the creation of the emotional and dramatic content of the opera.

1. The Relation between Music and Text in the Western Opera History

The history of Western opera is replete with polemic on the relationship between text and music, perhaps because in the creation of an opera – music drama – the successful marriage of text and music is crucial to its success. Composers differ in their views on the relative importance of music and libretto. Some claim that the creation of the words before the music restricts their musical expression; yet others find the words act as a stimulus that intensifies and deepens their musical creativity.

The libretti for the early operas, usually based on mythological subjects, were written to provide words for fixed musical forms. As the aria grew in importance during the seventeenth century, librettists were expected to produce more elaborate texts that would allow the composer to portray a wider range of emotions. Not until the eighteenth century when comic opera became popular and composers began to set music to well-written librettos,¹ did they start to work very closely with their librettists from the moment of an opera's conception. The type of close working relationship exemplified by the partnership of Mozart and Da Ponte was to be followed later by Verdi with Piave and Boito, and Richard Strauss with Hofmannsthal. However, generally, the separation between musician and librettist gradually increased as they grew to be equal but more-or-less independent partners, with one supplying the text and the other the music needed to create a music drama. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, Wagner and Berlioz set the example of composers writing their own librettos, not out of pride but rather to

¹ Brain Trowell, *Libretto: Historical Survey*, Grove Music Online ed. L. Macy (Accessed 17 March, 2004), <http://www.grovemusic.com>.

enhance their individual musical style² through the total integration that they felt was achievable only by setting their own words to their own music. Recently Gian Carlo Menotti and Michael Tippett have continued along the same path. Nevertheless, it is not for every composer to write his own libretto; so, a collaboration of two artists working in collaboration in varying degrees of closeness tends to be the norm today. Working in partnership on the creation of an opera remains a challenge for both the librettist and the musician.

For the opera, *Iron Road*, the creation of music and text in its final form stemmed from a teaming up initiated in one of the Composer-Librettist Laboratories (Lib-Lab), held by Tapestry New Opera Works. The Lib-Lab offers a composer and a potential librettist the opportunity to experiment in a workshop with different partners on a dramatic musical piece. It is firmly emphasized that each partner play an equal part in the creative process. For example, at a later laboratory organized by Pacific Opera Victoria in the summer of 2002, Wayne Strongman helped set up the pairs of playwright and composer for the six-day session. Among the exercises set was the selection of a long passage from Euripedes, Homer or Shakespeare. The librettist, after a preliminary discussion with the composer, condensed the chosen passage into words suitable for singing. The composer then took the 'libretto' and set it to music. A second part of the assignment was to create a recitative that set the scene for the aria. To see if it worked on stage, the piece was performed. Then, a discussion followed with comments and suggestions from fellow librettists and composers and – this was especially important – from the performers.

² Ibid., (Accessed 1 March, 2004).

By the time of the Lib-Lab workshop, the search for a librettist to work with composer Chan Ka Nin had already taken some five years. It was initially believed that a Chinese-Canadian should write the libretto, and five were tried, among them Chan's younger brother. However, the trials were unsuccessful until 1997 when five months after working with Chan at the workshop, Mark Brownell agreed to be the second half of the creative team.

2. The Creative Process of Text Setting in *Iron Road*

One of the crucial points in the study of the relationship between music and text is to determine which one came first. Chan, when asked whether the text or the music came first, answered that "it worked either way."³ His answer suggests that the text setting of *Iron Road* underwent one, two or all three of the possible processes: (1) text was set to existing music; (2) music was set to existing text; or (3) a result was subsequently tailored by both composer and librettist. We must not forget the Cantonese translator, George Wong, who contributed a great deal with his knowledge of the Cantonese language and culture to the text, in addition to Brownell who wrote the original text in English.

Although the same language is common to both, there are marked differences between the composing of *Iron Road* and the composing of a traditional Chinese opera of the Cantonese regional type. (For a description of the creation of a Cantonese opera, see Chapter II, *A Study of Chinese Opera*) The composer of *Iron Road*, not having to comply with traditional strictures, had a creative freedom and flexibility in setting the text that is

³ Interview with Chan Ka Nin, March 1, 2001.

not allowed in Chinese opera. When music and text are flexible in relation to each other, an ultimate integration of the two can be achieved: “language changes in the context of music. In the same sense, music changes in the context of text.”⁴ *Iron Road*, not bound by a set of stringent rules, unlike traditional Chinese opera, is a model of music stressing the text and the text dramatizing the music in a partnership of mutual influence. As such, *Iron Road* is a contemporary example of a close collaboration between composer and librettist as artistic equals.

3. The Relation between the Music and the Cantonese Text








The effect that the Chinese linguistic tones have upon the vocal lines in Chinese opera is also to be found in *Iron Road*. The range of intonation implicit in the words of speech and aria – as well as the word groupings – drives the vocal lines of Chinese opera. Similarly, the vocal lines in *Iron Road* mostly follow the rise and fall of the intonation of the words. Thus, the contour of the melodic line is shaped by the intonation of each word as they precede and follow one another. For dramatic effect, the range of intonation can be exaggerated to certain extent, and the melodic contour can be varied according to dramatic needs. I shall focus on the attributes of the Cantonese linguistic tones (intonation and stress) that have the most influence on the vocal lines in *Iron Road*, and compare with them individually to the melodic contour of the musical lines. To clarify my study I shall give a brief account of the way word groupings relate to overall rhythmic structure.

⁴ Marcia Herndon and Norma McLeod, *Music As Culture*, Pa: Norwood Editions, 1979, p. 20.

To that end I shall provide an illustration of the Cantonese tonal system that will serve as a guideline in the comparisons I am going to make.

4. Cantonese Tonal System

There are seven tones in the Cantonese dialect, which are categorized according to their pitch levels and their pitch outlines. They can be recognized as shown in the following pitch graph of the voice:⁵

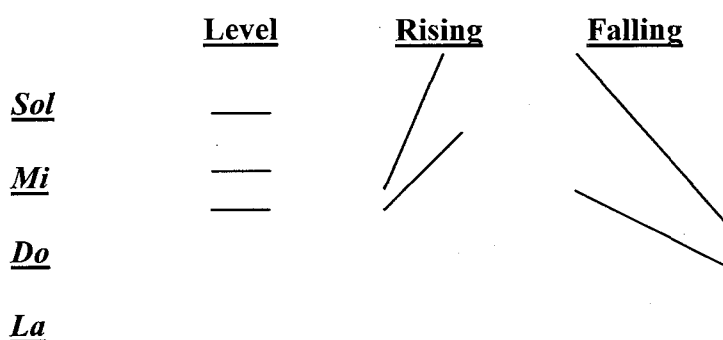
	Level	Rising	Falling
High			
Mid			
Low			

The vertical line represents a pitch axis and the horizontal line stands for pitch level.

Although the pitch level varies according to the individual voice, it corresponds closely to

⁵ Po-fei Huang, *Cantonese dictionary: Cantonese-English, English-Cantonese*, New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1970, p. xiv.

the solfege (solemisation syllables)⁶ from *do* to *sol* (upward) and *do* to *la* (downward) as follows:⁷



To avoid rigidity, the first tone may be altered when it is followed by the same pitch tone;⁸ the change would then affect the melodic contour.

5. The Correspondence of the Cantonese Linguistic Tone and Melodic Contour

a. Intonation and Stress

An examination of the melodic contours reveals three possible observations: (1) the linguistic and melodic pitches correspond closely when a single word character expresses an individual meaning, (2) in a musical phrase consisting of various units made up of two or more characters which have a single meaning, the linguistic and melodic pitches correspond closely only within each unit but not in the musical phrase as a whole, (3) exceptions occur when needed for dramatic effect.






⁶ It is a vocal exercise for the singing of the scale, interval, and melody. The syllables are: *do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si*.

⁷ Huang, *op. cit.*, p. xv.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

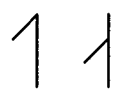
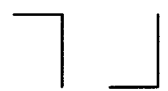

In *The Dream*, the *Five Elements* of Chinese cosmology – Metal (*Gam*), Wood (*Muhk*), Water (*Séui*), Fire (*Fó*), Earth (*Tóu*) – are emphasized in Ama’s vocal lines. Each (Chinese) character representing one of the *Five Elements* is given a distinct musical pitch that relates nearly to the linguistic tone. The melodic contour is driven along with the linguistic tones in high level, low falling, high rising, high rising, and another high rising; the *d*’ (Metal) descends to *a* (Wood) and skips up to *c*’ (Water) and stays on *c*’ for the remaining two high rising tones. The result is a greater fluctuation in the melodic contour that lends the quality of speech to the sung melody (see example 1)

EXAMPLE 1:

				
<u>Gam</u>	<u>Muhk</u>	<u>Séui</u>	<u>Fó</u>	<u>Tóu</u>
金	木	水	火	土

The matching of linguistic and melodic pitch based on the units of two or more characters, is exemplified by Ama’s reminder “Always remember...” that is transferred into seven Chinese characters in the combination of three units of 2+2+3 as follow:

EXAMPLE 2:

		
<u>Wíhng Yúhn</u>	<u>Fong joih</u>	<u>Nóuh hói jung</u>
永遠	放在	腦海中

In the first unit, both characters are rising tones. A semi-tone downward step is created as the high rising tone is followed by the low rising tone. The two level tones (the high level tone followed by low level tone) in the second unit are separated by a downward perfect 4th interval – a typical interval between high and low level tones. The upward melodic contour of the third unit – the end of the phrase – is made by the combination of two high rising tones and a high level tone; the high level tone is set to a higher musical pitch on the first two musical pitches to stress the meaning of the words. Although the melodic and linguistic pitches within each unit are closely allied as a result of a greater fluctuation in the melodic contour, the departure pitch of each unit can be varied according to the unit which precedes and follows. Consequently, the melodic contour has a smooth flow that gives a lyrical quality to the singing. The two examples above show the relation between linguistic and melodic pitches that gives the vocal lines a speech quality similar to that in Chinese opera.

In contrast, the matching of linguistic tone and rhythm in *Iron Road* does not follow the regular pattern of Chinese opera (long stress corresponding to long note and vice versa). Chan has the short stress create a dramatic emphasis by setting it at the end of phrases. The linguistic tone with a short stress is positioned as the last character of each seven-word grouping, and is extended with a matching long-held musical pitch. In addition, those short stresses (those underlined) are all rhymed and function as connectives to other word groups. (See the overall scheme below, *The Dream*, m.10-42.)

(Always remember....)



Wíhng yúhn Fong joih Nóuh hói jung

永遠放在腦海中

(Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth)



Gam Muhk Séui Fó Tóu

金 木 水 火 土

(Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth)



Gam Muhk Séui Fó Tóu

金 木 水 火 土


(Five ancient elements that make up life.)



Ngh háhng Sèung hak Sihng tin douh

五行相剋成天道


(Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth)



Gam Muhk Séui Fò Tóu

金 木 水 火 土

(Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth)



Gam Muhk Séui Fò Tóu

金 木 水 火 土

(Always shifting, fighting, freeing.)



Sèung sáng Sèung hak Wahn chihng dou

相生相克運程到

(The ancient laws are clear.)



Pùuh gú Chò hòì Dehng léih sòu

般 古 初 開 定 理 數

b. The Relationship of Word Grouping to Rhythmic Structure

The rhythmic structure of the music in the sections set to the Cantonese words of *Iron Road* is characterized by word grouping. There are two word groupings that can be identified: even-numbered and odd-numbered. The second occur more often in *Iron Road*, e.g., five-word, seven-word and nine-word groupings. The even-numbered word verses create a rhythmic effect different from that of odd-numbered ones; a variety of motions is provided by the combination of verses of different length which creates different dramatic implications. At the beginning of *The Dream*, seven-word and five-word groupings are arranged in a set pattern (7-5-5-7-5-5-7-7-7). The seven-word groupings are made of three small units in the pattern of 2+2+3 (characters) while the five-word groupings contain five individual characters. Because of its consistent scheme, this section stays mostly in 4/4 time; the degree of meter fluctuation is more stable. The meters change only at the transition between word groups (m.16-17, 27, 37-40). The stability in the rhythmic flow of the music conveys a ghostly/tranquil sense, suggestive of Ama's spirit.

As Ama's spirit starts warning Lai Gwan of the consequences of marrying Nichol, the metrical scheme shifts from odd-number groupings to a combination of even-number and odd-number groupings (4-4-6-6, 5-5-6, 5-6), with frequent changes of meter almost bar by bar. The ebb and flow momentum creates a rise in dramatic tension (m.43-55).

Example below:

4-4-6-6 (4/4-3/4-2/4-3/4-4/4-3/4)

5-5-6 (4/4-2/4-4/4)

5-6 (4/4-3/4-4/4)

The consistent pattern gradually becomes less obvious towards the last part of the scene. Five-word groupings are in the majority, though spread among others. The irregularity of the word groupings and changes in meter create an expansively fluctuated melodic contour that in its chaos suggests the great anger of Lai Gwan's ancestors (m.67).

Example below:

4-5 (3/4-2/4-4/4-2/4)

7-5 (4/4)

5-9 (5/4-4/4)

6-6 (4/4)

5-5 (2/4-4/4)

7-5 (4/4)

8-12-8-9 (4/4)

5-5 (4/4)

There are three types of word grouping to be found in *The Camp* (Act I, Scene 6). At first, each verse is composed of two-word groupings with the same number of words. They are juxtaposed, expressing corresponding ideas. At the very opening, the libretto consists of eight-word groupings covering two lines; the first two lines mean "Another death", and the second mean "No food, No hope," (m. 6-11). After the first ten lines, combinations of unequal numbered word groups occur in the form of question and answer: a five-word grouping poses a question, "And who's fault is that?" which is answered by a seven-word grouping (m.186-), "They get rich off our backs." Then, a variation occurs as a statement is elaborated in an echo-response: a five-word grouping

meaning “Beautiful is the East” is repeated and augmented: “Beautiful is the East, My little town,” (m.132-).

The three types of word groupings described above – juxtaposition of similarly numbered word groupings to convey corresponding ideas, question and answers using different numbered word groupings, and echo-repetition of words with elaboration – create a rhythmic effect with rhymed musical phrases that resemble those of classical Chinese poetry which is “characterized by word-groupings, beats, and alternation of dynamics.”⁹

6. Conclusion

The Cantonese language provides three basic guidelines for the musical setting of the text of *Iron Road*. They are intonation, stress, and word grouping; intonation guides the contour of melodic lines, stress gives rise to the pattern of rhythm, and word grouping gives a sense of motion to melodic lines. Despite the limitations imposed by linguistic tones, Chan is able to shift the pitch level of word groups to a certain extent and, by doing so, set the music free.¹⁰ By closely matching the melody and linguistic tones, Chan conveys dramatic expression not only by clearly presenting the meaning of the words of the libretto but also by highlighting their meaning through his emphasizing the characteristics of the Cantonese linguistic tones. Chan transforms the Chinese language into a dramatic musical language in the Western operatic context.

⁹ Rao, Nancy Yunhwa, *The Role of Language in Music Integration: Poeme Lyrique II by Chen Qigang*, *Journal of Music in China*, 2/2, 2000, p. 278.

¹⁰ Larry Lake interview with Chan Ka Nin, Mark Brownell, and Wayne Strongman, CBC Radio, *Tow New Hours*, July 1, 2001.

CHAPTER IV

The Role of Chinese Philosophy in the *Iron Road*: A Study of the Characters

More than an opera telling the story of the building of the CPR, or an exotic romance, *Iron Road* is a dramatic illustration of Chinese traditions at work within an Western context. The composer and librettist have purposely constructed a libretto that includes many of the fundamental concepts of Chinese philosophy and religion that have played an essential part in the development of the Chinese worldview. I shall, therefore, outline the beliefs and social values that have had an enormous influence upon the Chinese family, and then show how the behaviour of the Chinese characters in the opera and their relations with one another in a different social context are affected by those religious and philosophical beliefs.

1. The References to Chinese Traditions

China, during its five thousand-year history, has developed a rich culture that has had a profound effect on its people's thinking and behaviour. Early Chinese thinking embraced natural phenomena, such as cyclical changes, the process of growth, and the bipolarity of nature,¹ and developed "a view of the cosmos as an organic whole in which heaven, earth, and man are part of a single world, each merging and interacting with the

¹ Laurence G. Thompson, *Chinese Religion*, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996, p. 1.

other.”² Those interactions may result in conflict or harmony. The attainment of harmony became the primary goal of Confucian moral and social notions.³ Confucian values were strengthened further by the Chinese social system and by its religious institutions: Buddhism, Taoism, and popular religion.⁴

The three main belief systems, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are important strands running all through Chinese cultural traditions. Confucius (Kongzi, 551-479 B.C.E.), founder of Confucianism, stresses "*Ren*" (benevolence, love) and "*Li*" (rites) that guide the social system. Taoism, coexisting with the Confucian tradition, was formulated by Laozi (5th century B.C.E.) and Zhuangzi (3rd century B.C.E.), and later became an organized religion. Tao, meaning ‘the way’, offers alternatives to the Confucian way of life and point of view. It teaches conformity to the natural way of things.⁵ Buddhism, which was first introduced into China from South Asia through Central Asia in the early centuries of the Common Era, became popular during the last part of the Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.-220 C.E.).⁶ Over time, as Taoism developed, it absorbed aspects of Buddhist teaching – to the benefit of the former. Despite the fact that

² Richard J. Smith, *Cosmology, Ontology, and Human Efficacy*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1993, p. 115.

³ *Loc. cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁵ Judith A. Berling, *Taoism, or the Way*, Asia Society's Focus on Asian Studies, Vol. II, No. 1, Asian Religions, Fall 1982, pp. 9-11.

⁶ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Vol. 15, Chicago, p. 273.

Buddhism is a religion of foreign origin, its merging with Confucianism and Taoism has had a strong influence on Chinese traditions.⁷

The salient feature of traditional Chinese culture, in which each of the three religions serves an important social function, is its emphasis on the harmony of parts within a whole. People who accept all three beliefs as “different roads to the same direction,” are sometimes described as wearing “a Confucian crown, a Taoist robe, and a pair of Buddhist sandals.”⁸ At different times in history, diverse people of all statuses and from all the social groups have blended aspects of the three religions. The resulting amalgamation has become the ‘popular religion’, that is practised by the general populace. According to Stephen Teiser, the term popular religion refers to “the forms of religion practised by the Chinese people, regardless of social and economic standing, level of literacy, region, or explicit religious identification”.⁹ Various elements of popular religion at the practical level are to be found in *Iron Road*. Confucian teaching forms the basis of the relationships within Lai Gwan’s family.

Certain rituals found in the opera – offering incense to the dead, saying prayers to their spirits and recalling the soul – have evolved from the Chinese concept of cosmology and are now common elements of popular religion. Basic elements of Chinese cosmology

⁷ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Vol. 15, Chicago, p. 222.

⁸ William Theodore De Bary, et al. *Sources of Chinese Traditions*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1960. p. 631.

⁹ Donald S. Lopez ed., *Religions of China in Practice*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 21.

lie behind the dramatic depiction of the characters in the opera. The *Five Elements*¹⁰ (*wu-hsing*) – metal, wood, water, fire, earth – and the interactions between *yin* and *yang* form the basis of two fundamental theories, now part of popular religion, that explain the natural process of change in the universe. *Yin* and *yang* are two equal and contrasting forces that merge into each other in a complementary way;¹¹ similarly, each quality of the *Five Elements* interacts with the other four as they all undergo continuous transformation. In the opera, the interactions between the characters reflects that continuous process of change, but at the same time there is a movement away from conflict towards harmony. The content of this chapter, therefore, will explore the family relationships and rituals in the opera as they relate to Chinese popular religious beliefs.

Unlike Buddhism and Taoism, each of which fits the definition of a religion, Confucianism is a system of social and ethical philosophy – one that has codified the social values of traditional Chinese society.¹² Confucianism emphasizes the well known ‘Five Relationships’, meaning those between a ruler and his minister, a father and his son, a husband and his wife, elder and younger siblings, and between friends. Three of them concern family relationships.¹³ That fact indicates the great importance of the family to the Chinese. Furthermore, that emphasis placed upon the family, the fundamental unit of

¹⁰ In correspondence with the composer and librettist’s concept, the term of “*Five Elements*” will be used throughout the thesis, instead of “*Five Phases*” which is used by many scholars to convey the concept of cyclical change.

¹¹ Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹² Berling, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-7.

¹³ Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions*. Macmillan, London, 1993, p. 57.

Chinese society, means that the cultivation of virtue by performing one's proper role within the family is one's primary duty. The continued existence of the ideal Confucian family, then, is dependent upon the maintenance of a harmonious relationship between husband and wife, between parents and children, and among siblings. The virtue of filial piety strengthens harmonious family relationships and is, therefore, the basis of strong family ties.

The depiction of the Chinese family in *Iron Road* shows a family's behaviour and values affected by Confucian teaching. That is not to say that people's behaviour always follows Confucian teaching: people adapt the rules according to the context and according to each individual's understanding of the rules and the way the rules apply to his or her personal situation.¹⁴ It would be wrong to assume that the result is disagreement and strife, for, as I have stated earlier the aim of Confucian teaching is harmony.

Before I examine the way the principles of Confucianism are followed in each character's relationship with the family and the familial relationships between the characters – mother and daughter, father and daughter, husband and wife – I shall outline the plot of the opera.

¹⁴ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 203.

2. The Plot

Ama,¹⁵ an old Chinese woman lies on her deathbed in a village hut in Guangdong province. The time is the early 1880s. She tells her daughter, Lai Gwan,¹⁶ that she believes her husband, Manli,¹⁷ Lai Gwan's father, will return from the New World and eventually the family will be together again. Manli left several years before as one of the Chinese that set out from the impoverished countryside to seek their fortune in North America. The family has not heard from him since. On the point of death, Ama gives Lai Gwan her own wedding gown, as a last gift. Until that moment Ama has resisted Lai Gwan's wish to go in search of her father, but as she dies, she tells her daughter to go to find him.

Lai Gwan disguises herself as a boy and boards a ship loaded with labourers bound for British Columbia. Meanwhile, the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway has begun and the line has pushed across the Prairies until it finds the way blocked by the Rocky Mountains. Manli makes his entrance as the Bookman who, as a go-between, helps organize the work gangs of cheap Chinese labour hired to build the difficult Fraser Valley section of the railroad. A white herder named Nichol exhorts the workers to conquer the ramparts of rock. Manli does not recognize his daughter, nor does she recognize him. When she challenges his authority, he assigns her the dangerous work of placing

¹⁵ The name of "Ama" literally means mother in Cantonese.

¹⁶ The name of "Lai Gwan" literally means beautiful gentleman.

¹⁷ The name of "Manli" literally means thousands of miles.

explosives in the rock walls while she is suspended in a basket. She wins Nichol's respect by fearlessly and successfully completing that first task.

In a quiet moment by a stream, Lai Gwan is caught bathing by Nichol, who discovers she is a woman. She pleads with him not to tell anyone. Manli enters suddenly causing them to separate before Nichol can decide. Still thinking Lai Gwan is a man, Manli sends her back to work.

The next day, after an accident, Lai Gwan leads the procession that is bringing a dead labourer back to the camp. The labourers blame Nichol for the death. Nichol then resolves to help Lai Gwan. When Manli and Nichol leave, the labourers gather around a fire where they voice laments for the dead and their longing for home, and begin to complain of the poor conditions in the camp. Finally, in their bitterness, they talk of killing the white men but Lai Gwan tells them they would do better to withhold their labour. However, the club-wielding white herders quickly put down their protest. When Lai Gwan tells Manli that there will be no work unless they are given food, he holds Lai Gwan responsible for the strike and tells the herders that she should be hanged. Nichol stops the lynching at the last moment. When Lai Gwan hears the name that they call the Bookman, she realizes he is Manli, her father, and before everyone present reveals that she is his daughter.

Lai Gwan has been banished from the labourers' camp. She sleeps and dreams of her mother, her father and Nichol. At dawn, Manli finds her and argues with her. Lai Gwan tells him Ama is dead and throws the wedding dress at him. Manli, guilt ridden, undertakes to set a risky dynamite charge in a tunnel. Nichol, meanwhile, finds Lai Gwan

and promises to help her. Learning of Manli's action, the two enter the tunnel to try to find him. An explosion traps them. Nichol is injured and Lai Gwan comforts him while they declare their love. Before rescuers can reach them, Nichol dies in Lai Gwan's arms. Manli is found, still alive.

Sometime later, a train arrives from the east, signaling the completion of the railroad. Donald Smith (Lord Strathcona) pounds in the last spike at Eagle's Pass while the Chinese are kept out of the official portrait. The labourers are dismissed, but someone is needed to consecrate the bones of the dead. Lai Gwan, together with Manli, performs the funeral rites; the spirits of the dead bless her and leave her in peace, reunited with her father.

3. A Study of Characters

a. The Character of Ama

Confucian principles lay down rules of propriety for all, according to gender, class, and lineage. In the ancient male-oriented society, a woman was restricted to the home and expected to practise the three submissions – to obey her father before marriage, her husband during marriage, and her sons in widowhood –and also to conduct herself according to the four virtues: morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work. Although, subsequent to the period of the opera, during the first half of the twentieth century, the strong family system underwent disruption during the first half of the twentieth century from political upheavals and economic crises, some of the family traditions have been maintained in Chinese society to the present day.

The character of Ama is an exemplar of a Chinese woman scrupulously fulfilling her multiple roles in a Confucian family. As a wife, a daughter-in-law and a mother, her primary responsibilities are (1) to develop the moral capacities of the family members – husband, children, and herself – to the fullest, and (2) to ensure that traditions, values and beliefs are handed down from one generation to the next. Despite the clear division of responsibilities between wife (domestic) and husband (public) in the male-centered Chinese society, the importance of the wife's active participation in shaping relationships within the family is fully recognized.¹⁸ So, in Confucian tradition, the wife is honoured who is faithful to her husband and cares diligently for her husband's elderly parents, and educates and guides his children. Ama, then, as a mother, is responsible for her daughter's moral education and for teaching her the traditions in which she, herself, believes.

Therefore, when Lai Gwan seeks permission to leave in search of her father, Ama at first insists that Lai Gwan be mindful of the sacrifices her father has made for the family and that she honour him by staying home. On her deathbed, she reminds Lai Gwan:

We must follow the traditions,
 Without tradition we're adrift,
 We must wait for father
 Honour your father by staying home. (Act I, Prologue, *The Old World*, m.40-49)

¹⁸ Wei-Ming Tu, *Confucian Thought*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985, p. 143.

Because the complete fulfillment of filial responsibility requires that women and men have legitimate children, marriage becomes the starting point of the family.¹⁹ The wife is responsible not only for procreation but also for arranging marriages for her children with compatible families. On her deathbed, Ama gives Lai Gwan her only legacy: her wedding dress as a symbol of her express wish for Lai Gwan to marry a good man like her father. Then, knowing she is not going to be able to fulfill her duty by arranging a marriage for Lai Gwan, she gives her permission to search for Manli:

Little flow'r
 Far too young...
 Find strength in my words.....
 Go and find him. (Act I, Prologue, *The Old World*, m.133-148)

The mother, as a good wife, has maintained faith in her husband, Manli, who promised her a golden future but never returned. She assures Lai Gwan, her daughter, that her father will return:

Baba²⁰ hasn't forgotten us
 Your father always has his reason
 For everything he does. (Act I, Prologue, *The Old World*, m.78-82)

Her relationship with her daughter is not broken by her death; rather, it is reinforced by her continuing presence in spiritual form; for example, Ama's spirit speaks to Lai Gwan in her dream to remind her of what she has taught her:

¹⁹ Paul Chao, *Chinese Kinship*, London: Kegan Paul International, 1983, p. 42.

²⁰ In Chinese, Baba means father.

Always remember....
 Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth
 Five ancient elements that make up life
 Always shifting, freeing
 Always shifting but always one....
 If you want to be happy
 You can't marry Nichol. (Act II, Prologue, *The Dream*, m.13-50)

Ama's spirit again appears cautioning Lai Gwan in *The Cave* when Lai Gwan and Nichol reveal their love for each other:

Mixed blood weakens the bond
 Mixed blood turns to water in time
 Remember my filial words? (Act II, Scene 5, *The Cave*, m.53-69)

Ama's strong influence on Lai Gwan through her teaching her the Confucian values continues even after her death. Her spirit follows Lai Gwan wherever she is, in her dreams and in the real world.

The treatment of the dead Ama by Lai Gwan and Manli is an example of the concept of deification of ancestors in Chinese religion. In Chinese society, the importance of family finds expression in ancestral worship, which reinforces the "cohesion of family and lineage."²¹ It ensures a continuous contact between dead and living family members. From the spiritual realm, the dead can exert more influence than they did while alive.

As Laurence Thompson points out, "The ancestral cult was one universal religious institution, but by ensuring the exclusiveness of each *tsu* [ancestor], it fastened on the

²¹ Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

nation a system of closely knit in-group units, each of which claimed the major share of each individual's loyalties and efforts at the expense of a larger social consciousness."²²

b. The Character of Manli

While Ama is portrayed as an ideal wife and mother, Manli cannot be held up as an example of the ideal Chinese family man, for he broke his promise to his wife and his daughter, and drifted away from Chinese traditions. Because of the economic depression and political disintegration in China at the time²³, Manli left his family and went to 'Gold Mountain' with the intention of improving his family's financial situation. Manli survived and became a successful businessman full of confidence and ambition, but instead of sending back money to support his family, he chose to forget his wife and daughter. Obviously, Manli's good intentions for his family were not strong enough for him to keep his word; he lost himself in the 'promised land' and denied his origins. Here, as much as Manli is scorning his countrymen, he is also describing the old self that he has discarded:

Beardless men of China,
From Province of Guang Dong [Guangdong],
So strong, so stupid, (Act I, Scene 4, *The Mountain*, m.62-71)

He flatters himself in the next passage by describing himself as an initiator who has reinvented himself. Unlike the others, he is a successful self-made man, and congratulates himself for having broken away from his past:

²² Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

²³ During the 19th century, the China economy had started to decline because internal uprisings, external threats, and the decadent imperial clan.

They'll do what I say.
 Cause I'm the fire,
 That starts from a little spark,
 And grows to inspiring flame. (Act I, Scene 4, *The Mountain*, m.71-78)

According to Manli's way of thinking, the old traditions do not apply in the New Land. He has come to believe that abandoning his past, together with its traditional responsibilities and values, has won him the freedom of his future. As he advised Lai Gwan at their first encounter, not knowing she was his daughter:

Kid, a word of advice,
 You're in the New World now,
 Burn the past,
 And start a new future, (Act I, Scene 4, *The Mountain*, m.176-182)

Here, the use of "burn" can be understood in two ways: (1) to get rid of something, as in disposing of refuse (Manli's past.); and (2) to submit to change, as in a process of transmutation. It is as if Manli is unconsciously telling himself the past cannot be completely disposed of; it is something that has to be passed through. One can never be rid of the past, though one had chosen to relinquish it. One of the ritual-practices of popular religion, the burning of paper replicas is performed at funerals to deify ancestors and at temples to seek blessings from supernatural beings. When something is ritually burned, the action is carried out with conscious intent and self-examination, and marks the transition from one state of being to another. Many Chinese-Canadians are familiar with the connotations of that Chinese ritual.

Not until Lai Gwan calls him “father” does Manli acknowledge his past as a husband and a father. Instead of asking for forgiveness, he upbraids Lai Gwan for not behaving respectfully towards him in front of the Chinese workers that he looks down on. Manli shows no concern for his daughter’s feelings, but thinks only of the Chinese workers’ perception of him in his position as a bookman. His would-be self-image as a strong, powerful leader is shattered by her exposure of his moral failing:

Not a thought to your father
 No thought what you have done to me
 I am ashamed in front of them
 Those peasants I could crack them in two and burn them like kindling
 But now they look down on me
 They look down on Manli. (Act II, Scene 2, *The Fight*, m.4-12)

The head of the Confucian family has great power and authority. Thereby, the principal authority of the family is the father’s which requires that the children show active devotion and respect towards their parents.²⁴ However, as a father, Manli has set up a double standard: he expects Lai Gwan to bow down to him to show him the respect due to him from an obedient daughter in accordance with the very traditions that he has forsaken by abandoning his family.

Don’t say that word!
 You have no right,
 Shut up and listen,
 Bow down to me.
 I am Manli. (Act II, Scene 2, *The Fight*, m.13-16)

²⁴ Chao, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

Unlike Ama who kept faith in him and in Chinese family traditions, Manli, once in the New Land, discarded those traditions and failed to fulfill his responsibilities as the head of the Confucian family. Therefore, according to Confucian principles, he is not a proper gentleman and is not fit to be a husband and father. Knowing that, he resists being recognized as Lai Gwan's father for that would entail his admitting that he has failed his family, and, instead, he emphasizes his identity as Manli, the successful bookman. It is not until he is told that his wife is dead that, in his grief, he feels remorse and confesses his guilt:

I promised her a golden future
 I promised her I would soon return
 But time took me
 Consumed my memory
 Greed took me
 Make me forget family, forget my wife...my daughter. (Act II, Scene 2, *The Fight*, m. 93-103)

Having learned of his wife's death and recognizing that he has lost his daughter's respect, he realizes that life, after all, is meaningless without his family. He then seeks to redeem himself by assuming the job of setting off the explosion in the tunnel. An explosion is linked with fire, which cleanses Manli of the guilt of being an unfit husband and father and transforms his spirit for salvation. In the end, having been rescued, he helps with the burial of the dead.

The element of “Fire” is employed metaphorically in Brownell’s libretto to convey Manli’s character.²⁵ There is evidence to suggest that Manli represent the symbol of “Fire” of the *Five Elements*. He tells Nichol of his ability to master the Chinese workers and makes an analogy of himself as the “Fire”:

I’m the fire
That starts from a little spark
And grows to inspiring flame. (Act I, Scene 4, *The Mountain*, m.71-78)

He also advises Lai Gwan to “burn” the past and “start a new future”, (Act I, Scene 4, *The Mountain*, m.176-182). The flame of the “Fire” is eventually consumed by time; his love for family diminished. As he lament for his wife’s death:

I promised her
A golden future,
I promised her
I would return,
But time took me,
Consumed my memory. (Act II, Scene 2, *The Fight*, m.93-98)

c. The Character of Lai Gwan

In Confucian teaching, women were expected to cultivate the virtues of filial piety, faithfulness, loyalty, diligence, trustworthiness, and sincerity.²⁶ Lai Gwan, a young Chinese woman, born into the feudal society of late nineteenth century China, is a

²⁵ Tapestry New Opera Work which initiated the *Iron Road* Education Program to introduce young students into the creative process of making an opera states the idea in the Study Guide, p. 20.

²⁶ Susan Mann, and Yu-Yin Cheng ed. *Under Confucian eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2001, p. 48.

daughter carrying on the traditions from which she draws her strength as she searches for her father in the New Land. Because of her father's absence from the family, she, as the only child, is expected to help her mother as a son would. At the same time, as a woman, she is expected to practise the "three submissions and four virtues" of a dutiful daughter. Her family circumstances have developed the qualities in her that enable her to develop her inner strength and to gain independence in the New Land where she finds her father, and to build a new future.

By having Lai Gwan say at the beginning of the opera that she speaks English "This tongue speaks English now. That's our ticket to the new world" (Act I, Prologue, *The Old World*, m.33-36), Chan and Brownell reveal something of the political and economical circumstances in China of the period, and help make it possible for Lai Gwan to go alone to the New Land. While Ama speaks of the sacrifices Manli made on behalf of his family, Lai Gwan, spurred by faith in, and love of, her father, is determined to look for him in the 'Gold Mountain', where he and many others have gone to seek their fortunes.

Lai Gwan is not convinced by Ama's passive attitude that she should stay home and await her father's return. Instead, she wants to take the initiative and bring about her family's reunification. Unlike Ama who follows tradition in a conventional way, Lai Gwan lets her own interpretation of tradition guide her. At Ama's deathbed, Lai Gwan expresses her pragmatic view of her family values:

AMA: Find strength in my words

LAI GWAN: What good are your words when

We cannot pay the price

For a bowl of rice

Cannot pay the price?

AMA: Ama's here.

Put away your fears for today

LAI GWAN: Ama, what good are words without Baba? (Act I, Prologue, *The Old World*, m.136-143)

Although Lai Gwan has decided to search for her father who has been absent for more than ten years, her dying mother at first insists that she should have faith in her father and stay home to wait for his return:

AMA: Honour your father by staying home.

LAI GWAN: I'm staying with you, Ama.

Like a dutiful daughter should. (Act I, Prologue, *The Old World*, m.48-51)

Lai Gwan is avoiding confrontation and at the same time trying to honour her mother's wishes while she is still alive, deferring to Ama's belief in the tradition that good women should stay home. Only later does the dying mother recognize that Lai Gwan will soon be alone, and, if she should then go looking for her father without having first obtained her mother's consent, she would then be an unfilial daughter. Ama, therefore, tells Lai Gwan in her last words to find Manli but to remember to honour her family. Lai Gwan has received permission to undertake her journey to the New World in search of her father; as unusual as the venture may be for a young woman, it is undertaken with parental approval and so accords with tradition.

Although Confucianism has the reputation of being repressive toward women,²⁷ Lai Gwan is acting within the ideal of the Chinese womanly virtues but with a new vision that sees beyond the limits of the 'Old World'. Ultimately, the New World provides a stage for the playing out of Lai Gwan's own interpretation of Chinese traditions while at the same time remaining faithful to her parents by finding a resolution to her moral conflict (arising from her love of a *gweilo*). In the end, the underpinnings of her character are revealed – strength and independence. Knowing that as a woman alone she would not be able to accomplish her quest, she disguises herself as a man. Her courage and wisdom have prepared her for the challenges to come.

In feudal Chinese society, it was not unknown for Chinese women to dress as men and effectively conceal their female identity, in order to pursue educational goals, or to fulfill family obligations. Such a one was Mulan, a famous historical figure, who disguised herself as a man so she could serve in the military in her aged father's place. After several years spent fighting for her country, Mulan obtained permission to leave the emperor's service. In recognition of her outstanding deeds on his behalf, the emperor offered her a choice of ministerial posts, but she requested a fine horse instead and rode home to resume her female role. Only later, when her former army comrades went to visit her, did they learn that she was a woman. According to legends and history books and legends, she was from the Central Plains of China and lived before the Tang Dynasty. The true spirit of Mulan, also found in the Song Dynasty poem *Mu Lan Ci*, gives an idea of the extremes to which children might be expected to go in trying to meet the demands of

²⁷ Chenyang Li, ed. *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender*, Chicago: Open

filial responsibility, and at the same time shows that women could excel through skill, if not strength.

One could see Lai Gwan as a modern version of Mulan,²⁸ and, indeed, according to Chan Ka Nin, her character was partly inspired by the legend. Notwithstanding the historical precedent, Lai Gwan breaks the stereotype of the submissive Chinese female. She does not allow tradition to prevent her from asserting her rights. Instead, aspects of her traditions strengthen her so that she can overcome the tribulations of the New World.

Once she has arrived in Canada, when the bookman questions her about her ability to work as a labourer, she claims with confidence:

I can climb, I can dig, (Act I, Scene 4, *The Mountain*, m.165-167)

Those assertions throw light on her origins; she obviously is a countrywoman whose family chose not to subject her to having her feet bound, a custom that was thought to create beautiful feet, and to be a sign of gentility and higher class.²⁹ During the *Ch'ing* Dynasty (1644-1911), foot binding was a powerful gender symbol not only of wealth and leisure, but also of beauty, sensuality, vulnerability, dependency and respectability.³⁰ As Lai Gwan grew up during the years of her fathers' absence, she had been required to help the family by working as a son would, even though she had still been expected to be the

Court, 2000, p. 1.

²⁸ From the interview with Chan Ka Nin in March 2002, I have learned that the composer is inspired by both the legend of Mulan and an article about a Chinese woman who came to Canada on ship.

²⁹ The practice of foot binding began in the *Song* Dynasty (960-976 BC) and was banned at the end of *Ch'ing* Dynasty and the beginning of New Republic in 1911, though is continued up to the 1940s in some parts of China.

obedient daughter who, like her mother, observed the traditional three submissions and four virtues.

When Lai Gwan presents herself in a new land as a man, she has the freedom to speak out for herself. With her courage and wisdom, she learns to survive in the midst of men, who tried to take her share of food, and to stand up for fair treatment. She wins the respect of the other Chinese labourers when she confronts Manli. She questions him about their pay:

A dollar a day?

What's your take...?

When do we get paid? (Act I, Scene 4, *The Mountain*, m.186-194)

No more work from us, Bookman.

Not until we get some food. (Act I, Scene 6, *The Camp*, m.282-284)

When she finally finds out that the bookman is Manli, her father, Lai Gwan's feelings are mixed. The happiness she might have felt on finding her father seems to have been completely submerged by her feelings of rejection and fury at learning what he has become: the notorious bookman, so harsh towards the Chinese workers, including Lai Gwan herself, his own flesh-and-blood. Lai Gwan confronts her father with an accusation that to her is the only rational explanation for his abandoning the family:

Ama bore you a useless daughter.

That's why you're ashamed.

That's why you forgot us.

No boy to carry on your legacy. (Act II, Scene 2, *The Fight*, m.24-31)

³⁰ Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, California: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 56.

In ancient Chinese feudal society, the duty of the wife was to procreate. A wife who failed to produce a successor (a son) would face severe criticism from both her husband and society. On the other hand, a woman who gave birth to more than one son would gain the special favour of her husband. Daughters, however, might well be looked down upon; hence, Lai Gwan's feelings of rejection and the only possible explanation she could find for her father's abandonment, and her confronting to him with the accusation.

When Lai Gwan drops her disguise in the bath by the stream scene, she exposes herself as a woman, physically and emotionally. Freed of her male persona and thinking herself alone, she makes no secret of her feelings for Nichol, and sings as a woman in love. She reveals her true self, confessing:

I am pulled by a river.
 Tumbled to a new shore where I see Nichol.
 What's he to me?
 A gweilo³¹ (white guy), like the rest...but...
 I am pulled by a river,
 Tumbled to his shore. (Act I Scene 5, *The Stream*, m.36-45)

After Nichol has discovered her true identity, Lai Gwan, for the first time in her life, pleads for help from a stranger; she asks him to help her search for her father and to keep her secret:

Help me.
 You're the only one
 that knows my secret

³¹ The literal translation for *gweilo* is 'ghost fellow'.

I'm all alone
 Hidden, searching...
 Help to keep me hidden
 Help to find my father
 Keep my secret." (Act I, Scene 5, *The Stream*, m.58-74)

Coming to the New Land has not freed Lai Gwan of her obligations and the expectations of her as a daughter and a woman. As a Chinese woman, she is not free to make her own choices and should conform to traditional expectations. The voices of Ama and her ancestors remind Lai Gwan of the consequences of being in love, contrary to Chinese traditions, with a 'gweilo':

Always remember....
 Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth
 Five ancient elements that makes up life...
 Meet fire with water,
 Meet stone with wave,
 If you want to be happy,
 You can't marry Nichol.
 You must be cast out,
 Shunned and shamed!...
 Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth / Don't disobey, remember. (Act II, Prologue, *The Dream*, m.13-63)

In Confucian tradition, filial obligation is owed not only to living parents but also, in the form of commemorative devotion, to their spirits and to those of their dead ancestors:

To remember the ancestors, to perform the same rites, and the same music which they performed when living, to reverence what they revered, to love what they loved, to

serve them after death as they were served during their life, and to serve them though they have disappeared as if they still existed, that is perfect filial piety.³²

The edict of her ancestors shatters her hopes of a future with Nichol. The exposure of her female identity has dissipated her strength. She is once more the daughter who has to conform to the expected forms of behaviour. Outcast from the camp, and feeling rejected by all, she laments her worthlessness:

Just a girl now, less than nothing.
 Shunned and shamed by those who once listened.
 Shamed to father, shamed to family....
 Nichol saved my life but left me to be banished.
 But saved from death
 But now...
 But now I am outcast. (Act II, Scene 1, *The Dream*, m.110-127)

Accepting her true identity – a Chinese woman – means that she can no longer speak out for herself and that she does not have the freedom to choose and create her own future. She finally comes face to face with her worst inner fear – being cast out by those who share her traditions. She cannot bear to face Ama’s spirit and be censured for loving Nichol; she tries to flee from him, saying:

I’ve no reason to stay.
 I am running from the truth.
 I would rather die than face it. (Act II, Scene 4, *The Tunnel Mouth*, m.2-6)

³² Chao, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

That proclamation does not sound as if it comes from a woman who disguised herself as a man to cross the ocean to look for her father. Her faith in her father had made her strong but her forbidden love has weakened her strength. As a woman, she hesitates over her true feelings – her ‘forbidden love’ – not only because of her fear of being rejected by those who share her Chinese traditions, but also because of her fear of the unknown future. Having been denied by her father, Lai Gwan wonders how Nichol sees her. She asks him:

What am I like?

I am a slave, an outcast.

He [Manli] doesn't love me...what am I like to you? (Act II, Scene 4, *The Tunnel Mouth*, m.36-50)

Just as her need to look for her father was so strong and pure that it gave her strength to go beyond the bounds of tradition, so, with the realization and admission of her love for Nichol, she regains her courage and finds herself ready for the new challenge. She asserts her true feelings:

All my life never questioned.

All my life held back by duty.

My love is frozen river that river wants to flow, forbidden love. (Act II, Scene 4, *The Tunnel Mouth*, m.63-73)

After the tunnel explosion set off by Manli, Lai Gwan finds Nichol injured, but sees no sign of her father. While Lai Gwan and Nichol express their feelings for each other,

Ama's spirit keeps returning to remind Lai Gwan that the consequence of falling in love with Nichol, of breaking with tradition, is being cast out by the family:

AMA: Little flower
 Mixing blood
 Weakens the bond....
 A river of water
 Will fall from your eyes....
 Remember my final words
 Remember your father?...
 Darkness will fall
 Lover's flame will flicker....
 Love's flame is ghostly light with this gweilo. (Act II, Scene 5, *The Cave*, m.57-78)

The character of Lai Gwan is depicted in terms of the symbol of "Water" of the *Five Elements*.³³ Her adaptability and insistence are like water finding its way over rocks and her persistence is the grit that eventually molds the rock. The element of water is also a calming agent; it extinguishes fire. Lai Gwan finally crosses over the barrier and allows her true feelings to run free. She is now sure that Nichol is her Gold Mountain, her new future:

It can't be wrong. Ama.
 It's right.
 My heart beats its truth....
 Father is dead
 The old way died with father....

³³ In the *Iron Road* Study Guide (p. 20), it states that each dramatic character in the *Iron Road* represents a corresponding component of the *Five Elements*. For example, Manli is represented by "Fire", Lai Gwan is represented by "water".

You want me to find a good man.

He is here, Nichol is my Gum San [Gold Mountain]. (Act II, Scene 5, *The Cave*, m.61-83)

Ama's spirit fades as Lai Gwan makes her choice to be with Nichol. After Lai Gwan and Nichol sing and dream of their future, Nichol dies in Lai Gwan's arm.

Later, Lai Gwan is reunited with her father, who has been rescued from the explosion, but laments her loss of Nichol who died from it. She buries him and the other railway workers, and chants for the dead:

Summon the dead. Call them by the name.

Sacrifice made. Rekindle their flame.

We call on you, we call on you, strong vital men.

Held in our thoughts, you live once again....

Gain strength from us.

You will find peace.

We honour your lives.

We grant you release....

Wash, Wrap, Burn, Bless.... (Act II, *Epilogue*, m.154-186)

According to Ebrey, "In Confucian theory, ritual was seen as an alternative to force. People who routinely performed proper rituals were expected to recognize their social and ethical obligations and act on them."³⁴ Funerals and burials are part of the family rituals that serve "the gradual transformation of the dead into ancestral spirits."³⁵ Chinese believe that performing rituals is the way of communicating with ancestors who

³⁴ Ebrey, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 3.

“depend on the living for substance and support”³⁶ and a way of providing a rule for the living. “When the rituals of funerals and sacrifices are made clear, the common people will be filial.”³⁷ A Buddhist chant “*narm more or nay tor fu*”³⁸ is employed at the beginning and the ending of the opera first as a prelude to Ama’s death and later as a commemoration of the dead Chinese workers. The chant is used “(1) to lead all beings to salvation, (2) to seek to put an end to all pain and suffering,” and to remind one “(3) to study all teachings of the Buddha, and (4) to seek to perfect oneself.”³⁹ By burying the dead, Lai Gwan extends her filial respect to others. By saying the prayer, Lai Gwan gives strength to the dead for the transformation of their spirits.

4. Conclusion

On a personal level, Lai Gwan entered the New World without fear or hesitation, resolutely intending to reunite her family. That intention gave her the necessary strength and determination to overcome all obstacles: obtaining her mother’s permission to venture to the New World, disguising herself as a man, crossing the ocean, labouring intensively doing a man’s job as a railroad worker, and finally confronting her father and making him face up to his misconduct. Lai Gwan successfully met those challenges that were not common in the life of a Chinese woman of that period. In contrast, Lai Gwan

³⁶ Maurice Freeman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*, London: Athlone Press, New York : Humanities Press, 1965, p. 88.

³⁷ Ming Kao, *Ta Tai li-chi chin-chun chin-i*. “*Sheng-te*,” 66:279.

³⁸ It means “Hail to Amitabha Buddha.”

³⁹ Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

experienced emotional conflict when it came to yielding to her own wishes – to be with Nichol. To her, it seemed that breaking the traditional rules was permitted if it was for the sake of the family, but not if it was for her own self. With the avowal of her love for Nichol, she gains the courage to throw off the bonds of the guilt she has been feeling for thinking of her own happiness.

According to a saying of Confucius, “A father has a critical son.” That suggests that one may – even ought to – reason with one’s parents when their wishes are in conflict with righteousness. Thence, filial piety does not imply blind obedience.⁴⁰ Lai Gwan honoured her parents; she stayed with her mother until her death; she accepted Ama’s faith in Manli and searched for him, and, finally, she forgave her father and was reunited with him as a family. Compared with her mother, who followed traditional Chinese virtues conventionally in the ‘old world’, and in contrast to her father, who in the ‘new world’ discarded traditions without regret, Lai Gwan complied conscientiously and deliberately with the demands exacted by the traditional virtues in their fullest in both places.

When considered in terms of the Chinese worldview, the rationale of the opera conforms to Teiser’s comparison of human relationships with the concept of Chinese cosmology: “...yin and yang can be used to understand the modulations of qi [vital energy] on a mountainside as well as the relationships within family. The social hierarchies of gender and age, for instance, the duty of the wife to honour her husband, and of the younger generations to obey older ones, were interpreted as the natural

subordination of yin to yang.”⁴¹ In the opera, the interaction of yin and yang is shown both in the harmony and in the conflict in three different relationships: husband and wife, parents and daughter, the living and the dead. The harmonious family relationship becomes unbalanced once the husband is absent; there is imbalance in the family, which is now incomplete, left in the old world; and the husband, no longer in his customary social environment and without the cultural references he is used to, lacks the means to maintain his internal moral balance. The conflicts between mother and daughter, and then between father and daughter, occur when each part of the dualities is in a different social context. The family dynamics are also illuminated by reference to the qualities of the *Five Elements* that are to be found in the characters: the father (Manli) is “fire” and the daughter (Lai Gwan) is “water” that can extinguish “fire” (“water overcoming fire”).⁴² In popular religion, upon death the yin component of a person would “move downward” to Earth, and the yang would “float upward” to Heaven;⁴³ from their different locations each would exercise a direct influence on the living.⁴⁴ The spirits will give their blessings if proper burials and rituals are performed, and curses, if not. In the opera, the importance of funeral rites for the dead is underlined (Act II, The Epilogue, *Remember the Dead*) by the enactment of the proper burial ritual and by Buddhist chanting. With the combination of Confucian moral precepts, Buddhist religious practices, and the fundamental concepts of

⁴⁰ Chao, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

⁴¹ Lopez, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁴² Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁴³ Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

the *Five Elements*, the opera presents a complex of powerful Chinese cosmological and religious ideas that are shared by the Chinese people in general.

⁴⁴ Lopez ed., *op. cit.*, p. 35.

CHAPTER V

Musical Content

The musical structure of *Iron Road* is built within a framework of Western opera but makes use of both Chinese and Western compositional techniques. The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the operatic musical structure and of the general compositional techniques Chan employs. The way the Chinese and Western musical elements work in tandem and the influence of Chinese cosmological concepts on the musical structure will be discussed in a separate chapter.

1. Musical Structure

The musical structure of *Iron Road* is made up of all the basic elements found in Western opera – arias, recitatives, spoken dialogues, and choruses – within two acts, totaling twelve scenes and an epilogue. The arias are sung by the four main characters: Lai Gwan (soprano), Manli (bass), and Ama (alto) who are Chinese, and Nichol (tenor), Caucasian. The female characters (Ama and Lai Gwan) are given lyrical arias to voice what motivates them: Ama's faith in Chinese traditions, and Lai Gwan's determination to find her father, and later, her love for Nichol. The two main male characters (Manli and Nichol) introduce themselves with strong, assertive arias. Later, both male characters have arias in which each expresses his tender, inner nature: Manli's mourning for his wife and Nichol's love for Lai Gwan. The arias are highly context-dependent and for the most part are not constructed as isolated high points – that is, as arias that could stand as solo

virtuoso pieces. Recitatives and spoken dialogues intermingle with the arias to advance the plot. There are two choruses, one Caucasian and one Chinese, made up of railway workers full of hope of a new future. The choruses play an important part musically and dramatically. Musically, they counter arias by singing in different tonal scales (*The Ship*, m.116), or by singing in call-and-response fashion to the singers of the arias, and to each other. Dramatically, they supply narrative and enhance the drama – with spoken dialogue, or rhymed lyrical speech, in the sections set to a Cantonese text (with exaggerated tonal inflection but no musical pitch). Each of the two choruses sings in their own language.

The opera begins with a prologue – *The Old World* (Act I, Scene 1) opens in China where Buddhist chanting sets a solemn tone at the beginning of the scene and after Ama's death. A duet, which is sung by Ama and Lai Gwan and which establishes the mother/daughter relationship, runs through most of the scene with melodic support from the Chinese instruments. Ama is mainly accompanied by the *zhonghu* and the *yangqin*, and Lai Gwan by the *dizi* and the *guzheng*. There is interweaving of the voices with the instrumental accompaniment, the two character voices alternating with slight overlaps. The scene ends with a harp-like swirling, or flourish on the *guzheng*, which gives a sense of time passing as a transition to the next scene, *The Ship* (Act I, Scene 2), in which Lai Gwan is on her way to Canada to look for her father. Spoken dialogue and rhymed lyrical speech fill the first half of the scene to the accompaniment of rhythmic punctuation of Chinese percussion that helps to convey a sense of action. At times, a plaintive flute line conveys Lai Gwan's feelings of loneliness and isolation, and at others, brief, swift figures on the flute convey her agitation and anxiety over being a woman disguised as a man

aboard a ship full of rough labourers. In the second half of Scene 2, the “Gold Mountain” theme, sung by the Chinese chorus with full orchestra (Chinese and Western), announces the ship’s arrival in the New Land. The tone is at once busy, perky and industrious; the excitement of arrival is initiated by a driving bassoon line, later accompanied by brass instruments which respond to the chorus and suggest the sense of grandeur aroused at the sight of *Gum San* – the New World – before the music leads into the next scene.

The Iron Road (Act I, Scene 3) depicts the Macdonald government’s launching of the railroad syndicate taking place in Ottawa and provides a segue into the building of the railway across the Prairies from Eastern Canada. A snare drum roll and brass fanfare opens the scene which is dominated by Western instruments, conveying a sense of an auspicious occasion. Each character is given a brief aria with descriptive orchestral accompaniment to characterize him; for example, John A. Macdonald’s tottering clumsiness, the result of his drinking, is depicted by the motif of an octave leap with dotted rhythm. The moguls’ greed is satirized through the text, which is set to the melody of “God Save the Queen.”

A marching tempo gradually speeds up as the building of the railway moves west. There is a sudden stop in the middle of the scene when the construction comes up against the Canadian Shield; the progress of the rail laying and hammering is abruptly brought up short by the granite outcroppings, illustrated by a shrill, discordant blaring of brass. Then slow, methodical labour, emphasized by the plodding, chain-gang musical accompaniment, gradually increases in tempo as the railway workers make headway, gaining speed over the prairies, only to be brought up short again by another obstacle —

“the curtain of rock” known as the Rocky Mountains. A long call on horns depicts the dramatic sight of majestic mountain peaks. The fluctuations in the tempo recreate the speed and delays of the railway building. The scene ends with foreman Nichol’s *forte* proclamation, reinforced by a dramatic roll on timpani, that he will smash the rock. The moment of high ambition and resolve is undercut comically with the CPR chorus’s ingenuous query of “How?”

A swift chromatic ascending and descending line with Chinese percussive rhythmic punctuation introduces *The Mountain* scene (Act I, Scene 4), setting the scene and arousing anticipation of some coming drama. The character Manli is first introduced and, because of his background as a Chinese bookman for the CPR, his character is portrayed by a mixture of Chinese and Western instruments in which the clarinet and Chinese percussion predominate. Manli’s position as an intermediary between the two worlds is underscored as he introduces himself to the workers in an aria that constantly switches between atonal and pentatonic scales. He is accompanied by brief swift figures on the clarinet that complements the bass voice, and by punchy and rhythmic Chinese percussion that evokes his strong-minded personality.

The first meeting of the three main characters, Lai Gwan, Manli and Nichol, occurs in this same scene amid sounds of boisterous productivity. The background of each principal is hinted at by a specific instrument; Nichol’s by the harpsichord (a distinctly western instrument that complements the tenor voice), Lai Gwan still by Chinese melodic instruments, and Manli by a mixture of Chinese and Western instruments. The vocal lines of the three soloists and of the chorus overlap to a full

orchestral (Chinese and Western) accompaniment; the voices eventually run together in the scene's final crescendo, foreshadowing the increasing intertwining of the characters' lives through to the end of the opera.

The next scene, *The Stream* (Act I, Scene 5), consists of arias and recitatives for Lai Gwan and Nichol. The scene opens with an instrumental quotation of Lai Gwan's theme. It is characterized by an ostinato figuration on the strings throughout, suggesting the reflections of rippling water, while serving as an accompaniment to Lai Gwan's lyrical aria in which she expresses her feelings for Nichol. Nichol's aria is accompanied once more by a harpsichord. Following Nichol's discovery that Lai Gwan is a woman, the spoken dialogue and recitative between them, as they establish a tentative relationship, is supported by Chinese melodic and percussive instruments. The scene ends with a brief instrumental postlude for the full orchestra (Chinese and Western) playing in unison, symbolizing the love Lai Gwan and Nichol feel for each other.

The Camp scene (Act I, Scene 6) centres mostly on the Chinese workers. While they sing in unison in a dirge-like funeral march mourning the death of their comrades, the three characters, Lai Gwan, Manli, and Nichol, express their sympathy and voice their inner concerns in brief recitative verses that intertwine with the Chinese chorus. The Chinese workers' longing for home is expressed through what the composer calls "the tea-cup song". The song is noteworthy for being at one and the same time a ritual song acknowledging the death of their comrades and a lament for the Chinese workers' homeland. It starts with three solo voices, following one another and accompanied by Chinese melodic instruments, gradually joined by the Chinese chorus singing "Beautiful

is the East,” with support from both Chinese and Western instruments, to build to a high emotional peak.

The tension continues as Lai Gwan sings in rhymed lyrical speech, interspersed with forceful accusations from the Chinese chorus directed at the “*gweilo*”, the white bosses, blaming them for the losses of their fellow workers and the hardships they suffer. The Chinese chorus is joined by rhythmic punctuation from the orchestra. Lai Gwan, sensing the increasing vengeful mood of the workers who are focussing their anger on Nichol, averts a potential murder by pointing out the futility of such an action and then urging the rebellious workers to mount a labour strike instead. The sounds of a noisy demonstration as the workers clatter dishes and sticks is depicted by the agitated clatter of percussion, comprising rim shots on the snare drum and raps on the sides of the timpani. The brass joins the fray with syncopated rhythm and punchy staccatos. The scene reaches a peak with Manli’s entrance as he quells the melee with loud declamations. Manli gives emphasis to certain inflections of his words in Chinese to instill authority. Chinese percussive effects shadow his words for added colour, as the clarinet elaborates on his recitative.

The climax is reached when Lai Gwan finds out the bookman is her father. As soon as Lai Gwan declares she is his daughter, the scene ends abruptly with the percussion playing a rapid descending interval of a 3rd. The surprise ending of Act I leaves the audience in a state of suspense and anticipating the events in Act II.

A brief instrumental prelude introduces Act II. It recaps the “Gold Mountain” theme as well as excerpts of motifs from Act I on all instruments, serving as a musical

encapsulation of the plot to that point. The reiteration also serves as a reference and reminder in anticipation of the motifs coming up again and by harkening back to Act I, helps create continuity.

Three drumbeats (on an extra large bass drum) open the first scene of Act II, *The Dream* (Act II, Scene 1). Here Lai Gwan's struggle in her dream state between the demands of tradition and her true feelings is depicted by the juxtaposing of the voices of Ama, Nichol, and Manli. The three voices overlap with one another in different tonalities (pentatonic scale, tonal and atonal systems) with frequent interruptions from the echoing Chinese chorus of ancestral voices, the total effect suggesting Lai Gwan's tormented state of mind. The mixing of tonalities and interruptions also creates the sense of a chaotic dream, ending as Lai Gwan's aria begins at her awakening and realization of the full import of the situation now that she has been banished from the camp and estranged from her father. The scene concludes with an aria in which she expresses her feeling of despair and isolation.

The Fight (Act II, Scene 2) scene quickly follows with an agitated rhythmic pattern for the Chinese percussion. The scene is dominated by Manli's recitative explaining his sacrifices for the family and by his aria he expressing sorrow for the death of his wife. His recitative is supported by clarinet in an elaborated contour line, unsettlingly punctuated by Chinese percussion. Occasional objections from Lai Gwan, couched in recitative that is elaborated by Chinese melodic instruments, interrupt Manli's recital. There is occasional harmonic chordal support on the *yangqin* and *guzheng* which functions as basso continuo for recitative, somewhat as the harpsichord does in Baroque

opera. In contrast, Manli's aria is rarely given melodic support and is accented only sparsely by brief, rapid chromatic descending figures and punchy staccato triplets and sextuplets on the woodwinds, highlighting Manli's realization of the loss of his family.

Manli's desire for absolution is shown in the *Ah Lum and Ah Charn* (Act II, Scene 3) scene. The whole scene is in the style of Chinese opera, containing only dialogue – rhymed and spoken – and music on Chinese instruments which together serve to advance the plot and help portray the action. Manli has resolved to set the detonating charge and remain by to be killed. He volunteers to participate in the drawing of straws, snapping his own in half to determine the result. Immediately afterwards, a stylistic dance marks the end of the scene.

The scene shifts immediately to *The Tunnel Mouth* (Act II, Scene 4) where Lai Gwan resists Nichol's love. An ostinato figure again characterizes the whole scene. It accompanies both Lai Gwan and Nichol's arias and recitatives in multi-layers with various instruments (including Chinese melodic instruments) playing continuously throughout. The changes of timbre (switching between different instruments) and the abrupt breaks in the continuous ostinato figure creates a suspension, or dramatic tension, that posits moments of significance. After we are told that Manli is refusing to leave the burning fuse, the sound of an explosion ends the scene, a forewarning of tragedy.

In *The Cave* scene, (Act II, Scene 5) Lai Gwan finally proclaims her love for Nichol in a duet. Their voices inter-twine in dual tonalities (tonal and atonal) as if they were a unit. Lai Gwan's determination to follow her true feelings is conveyed through her aside duet with Ama in which both pentatonic and tonal scales overlap in the manner of

an argument. At last, Lai Gwan overcomes her mother's objections to her loving a "gweilo", and rejoins Nichol in a unison of rising intensity as they declare and confirm their love, to the support of Chinese and western instruments in combination. Nichol's death towards the end of the scene leaves Lai Gwan in despair but Manli's survival brings her new hope for the future. The scene concludes with the spoken reconciliation of father and daughter, as they realize they still have each other, while a solo *erhu* plays mournfully under her weeping.

A few drumbeats transform a complex emotional state into a celebratory scene, *Iron Dragon* (Act II, Scene 6), in which both CPR and Chinese choruses begin by singing joyfully of the completion of the railway. Rhythmic patterns on Chinese percussion, creating a festive atmosphere, are joined by the two choruses echoing back and forth and eventually overlapping. As the Chinese chorus sings of the train as "the iron dragon", they have the growing realization that the arrival of the train spells the end of their employment. The CPR chorus, meanwhile, is sending up cheers and hoorays in a blustering staccato fashion, happy to have finished the job – both choruses ending up expressing their different feelings about the completion of the railway. For the Chinese labourers, knowing the railway is about finished and they will be soon be out work, the approach of the train over the newly laid track is ominous and foreboding: they now sing of it as the "iron dragon" as though it were a harbinger of ill fortune (although dragons are normally considered to be of good portent, this one has a negative side):

One slash of its [Iron dragon's] tail
 And we're scattered like rice
 One gnash of its teeth
 And we're crushed like grain. (Act II, Scene 6, *Iron Dragon*, m.51-55)

The reverse is true for the white labourers, who, having a stake in the land as part of the status quo, can now brag of their accomplishment that of men as belonging to an exclusive camaraderie, united in the privilege of white society. Both choruses end up together expressing their different feelings about the completion of the railway.

The beginning of the last scene, *The Epilogue*, recreates the famous photograph of "The Last Spike". Cowbells denote the swinging hammer: the cowbells create anticipation of the spike being struck home in the manner of a vaudevillian sound effect, and add a comic aspect to Donald Smith's first two misses of the spike. The misses are sounded by a cymbal crash. Smith's success on the third attempt is marked by the percussive effect, created by a slapstick, that also mimics the camera's click as it takes the portrait. The Chinese workers, the missing faces in the portrait of the last spike, are now unwanted and are summarily dismissed by the herders' announcement, followed by the CPR chorus's rousing response scorning the Chinese labours. The Chinese workers' mixed feelings of anger and desperation are depicted by frequent change of tempo and punctuation on the Chinese percussion. The desperate atmosphere resolves into the episode of remembering the dead.

The prayer of remembering the dead consists of Manli and Lai Gwan's singing in duet with melodic support from both Western and Chinese instruments. Lai Gwan's following aria, a prayer to release and send off the dead, is underlaid by Buddhist

chanting. The four main characters – the two dead (Ama and Nichol) and the two living (Lai Gwan and Manli) – recollect the previous themes and sing either in unison or in response to one another. Finally, the Chinese chorus joins in the prayer by singing “Wash, Wrap, Burn, Peace” in unison to create a final climax. The opera concludes with Buddhist chanting which is similar to that with which the Act I, Prologue, *The Old World*, opened, yet different in arrangement. The chanting gives a sense of cyclic balance in musical terms, and increases the sense of a reconciliation of the conflicting forces in the opera.

2. General Composition Techniques

Chan’s programmatic approach to the depiction of Chinese and Western situations consists of three musical elements, each one referring to a distinct emotion, setting a scene, or landscape. They are (I) Thematic Treatment, (II) Programmatic Elements, and (III) Rhythmic Treatment.

I. Thematic Treatment

Specific themes are associated with specific contexts. Sometimes the themes reappear but are only briefly quoted and sparse, randomly spread between voices, instruments, and even scenes to recall a familiar context. They may appear simultaneously on both Chinese and Western instruments, creating contrasting colours (on different instruments or in different registers), as a symbolic reconciliation of Chinese and Western elements. Occasionally, two different themes run in parallel to represent conflicting thoughts. In *The Ship* (Act I, Scene 2) the Chinese workers’ theme set in the pentatonic scale, expresses the workers’ dream of future prosperity (see example 1).

EXAMPLE 1: Act I, Scene 2, *The Ship*, m.100-101

Chinese workers' theme sung at the octave by tenor and basses

“Money tumbles down your hills pockets lined with golden glory.”

Tenor

錢銀搵到黎話你認真好福氣

chin ngun won d(o) light wah lay ying jun hu folk hay

Bass

chin ngun won d(o) light wah lay ying jun hu folk hay

錢銀搵到黎話你認真好福氣

The chorus sings the theme, which is doubled by Chinese and Western instruments in different registers: the Chinese instruments (*erhu* and *guzheng*) double at the octave in a higher register and the Western instruments in a lower creating a space between the two octaves. The result is fuller colour and timbre. While the Chinese chorus sings of “Gold Mountain”, the theme is constantly repeated in echo-like fashion by the woodwinds, *guzheng*, and *yangqin*, playing parallel to each other. The use of the Western and Chinese instruments together conveys a sense that their hopes will be fulfilled in the new land.

II. Programmatic Elements

Chan uses various programmatic elements that are intended to express human emotions, convey the movement of objects, or depict landscape. To that end he employs three distinctive programmatic figurations: (a) repeated notes figuration, (b) ascending and descending figurations, and (c) ostinato.

a. Repeated Notes Figuration

It is a traditional practice in the percussive orchestration of Chinese opera to use repeated notes to express emotions and to portray a mood. This distinct percussive repeated note figuration is employed in *Iron Road* for the same purposes as in Chinese opera, where single note percussion played in a grouping can imply urgency, or build anticipation, depending on the beat and tempo. However, Chan elaborates upon the traditional by imitating Chinese percussion characteristics in passages of repeated notes played on various instruments (Western and Chinese), either simultaneously or following one another.

In the scene, *The Camp*, at the point where Lai Gwan fights for fair treatment, groups of repeated notes on different instruments evoke a sense of agitation. In *The Mountain*, the Chinese workers' fear of setting off dynamite on the mountain is depicted by repeated notes that are layered in the strings and matched with repeated words in the vocal lines — the overall effect being one of fearful stuttering.

Another example is to be found in the scene, *The Dream*, when Lai Gwan in a dream state is accused by a chorus of ghost voices of bringing dishonour on her ancestors

through her love of a “*gweilo*” Nichol. Both her father and mother figure prominently in her dream, the first angrily reproachful, the second cautionary. The repeated words and notes in the voice and in the accompanying strings, with punctuation from the timpani, underline Manli’s anger: “All my hard work, You’ve swept it away” which is followed by angry emphasis on the word “you” in Cantonese sung by the Chinese chorus (see example 2)

EXAMPLE 2: Act II, Prologue, *The Dream*, m.94-96

“The ancient laws are clear. Cast out, Shunned and shamed”

All my hard work You've swept it a- way

lay lay lay lay lay lay lay der but jeer s(earn) teen)

你你你你你你你對不住上天

Both scenes are concluded by repeated note passages, the former, *The Mountain*, on woodwinds, and the latter, *The Dream*, on percussion. Chan varies the use of repeated note figures to suit dramatic necessity by giving them to different instruments and, in doing so, strays from the typical usage of the percussive orchestra in Chinese opera. One reason for that departure is that long stretches of repeated note passages give a sense of movement. In the scene, *The Iron Road*, the sound effect of a train progressing across the continent is created by continuously repeated sixteenth notes in *accelerando* tempo played on the bassoon, cello, double bass, all in a parallel low registers. At the same time, the

CPR chorus recites the names of towns and localities as the railway line reaches each of them in turn (m.221-224): “Portage, Brandon, Flat Creek Moosomin, Broadview by end o’ the week, Pile O’Bones, Moose Jaw, Speedy Creek Medicine Hat, Cow Town by the end of the week.”

b. Ascending and Descending Figurations

Ascending and descending figurations are frequently used to paint features of the landscape in the opera. They sketch the contours of mountains with a scale-like passage and create the movement of a running river with intervallic figures that depict its energetic power. *The Mountain* scene reveals itself to a chromatic ascending and descending passage on the clarinet with Chinese percussion punctuation that not only paints the elegant shape of a mountain but also gives a sense its majesty.

Ascending and descending figurations are also used to highlight the images of landscape contained in the words of the vocal line. In *The Stream*, as Lai Gwan sings “Flowing to the sea,” a swell in the contour line disrupts the continuous ostinato line that is typically used to represent the serene quality of water. In *The Tunnel Mouth*, an ascending passage with a four-octave stretch is spelled out as Nichol describes Lai Gwan as ‘Beautiful, crashing water’. Another vocal line ‘Let it run free, a surging river’, again sung by Nichol, is accompanied by rapid descending lines, played in quintuplet perfect fourth intervals on the trumpets, trombones, and strings to propose that Lai Gwan free herself from the constrained behaviour required by her traditional upbringing. The scene ends with a swift, ascending run on Western instruments to imply Western influence – liberty.

c. Ostinato

Ostinato may be used symbolically to suggest repetitive motions. In *The Stream*, ostinato first appears in the viola in rocking motion intervals (see example 3) to accompany Lai Gwan's singing as she bathes in the stream, and reveals her feelings for Nichol.

EXAMPLE 3: Act I, Scene 4, *The Stream*, m.6-8

The musical score for Example 3 shows five staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The Viola part has a continuous eighth-note ostinato pattern with a rocking motion, marked with a piano (*P*) dynamic and the instruction *simile*. The Violoncello and Contrabass parts have sparse notes, with the Contrabass marked with a piano (*P*) dynamic.

Between m. 6-30, the intervals creating the rocking motion gradually expand, depicting the rippling motion of the water. The ostinato dominates in the strings in *The Stream* to paint the continuous momentum of flowing water, to set Lai Gwan's bathing scene, to provide sentimental atmosphere, and to accompany Lai Gwan and Nichol's expressions of their love for each other.

The other extended use of ostinato technique occurs in the Act II, Scene 4, *The Tunnel Mouth*. The scene unfolds to ostinato played in unison by the woodwinds and

marimba, which are used to evoke Lai Gwan's unsettled state of mind. She feels anxiety the possible revelation of her secret and her confusion over her feelings for Nichol; her emotional state here contrasts with the feeling of serenity evoked in *The Stream*.

The use of continual ostinato can also symbolize the endlessly repetitive motions of the labourious work on the railway line (e.g., swinging a pickaxe, and shoveling and digging a tunnel through the mountains). Though the ostinato in the woodwinds runs through the scene, *The Tunnel Mouth*, there is a five-bar interruption as Nichol and Lai Gwan clasp hands and nearly embrace. The second interruption in the continuous ostinato passage happens when, to another question of Lai Gwan's, Nichol answers, 'Other women...They're not like you,' (m.33-35). The returning ostinato switches between woodwinds (bassoon, English horn, clarinet, and flute) in bar-long fragments, mimicking Lai Gwan's brief question and Nichol's short answer as he tries to reassure her that to him she is not a slave but a strong woman. The ostinato passages grow shorter and the interruptions occur more frequently as the end of the scene draws nearer. The continuous flow of the ostinato line adds a narrative quality that allows Nichol and Lai Gwan to express themselves. In addition to the interruptions, the changes in its length, instrumentation, and tempo enhance dramatic high points.

III. Rhythmic Treatment

The specific nature of the themes and the reference to programmatic elements dominate the scenes whose rhythmic vitality is generated through metric fluctuation and a change in tempi for dramatic effect. Changes of meter and tempo denote a change of

scene or of atmosphere, and provide a transition to cover a character's change of mind or a time lapse. The frequency of changing meter or tempo signifies the degree of urgency.

Ultimately, the changes of meter or tempo not only mark contrasts in characters, scenes, and emotions but also help to create flexibility in the flow of the music. In the scene, *The Iron Road*, frequent changes of tempo allow a rapid switch between different settings. The scene is opened by a fanfare on brass instruments which is followed by a pep rally march – akin to one in an electoral campaign – that underlines the political dimension of the CPR's building history. Attending the introduction to the railway building scheme are politicians such as Macdonald and Donald Smith. Following Nichol's exhortatory declamation, the marching pattern picks up speed, leading the CPR workers onward for the laying of the railroad track. The railway work starts at a moderate tempo, but gradually gathers speed through tempo changes, the changes becoming more frequent as the railroad construction approaches the Rockies and the scene draws to a close.

Frequent metric changes occur, in most cases, in transitions between changes in tempo (m. 84-88, 162-165). Another place (m. 89-251), there are moments where slower tempi are inserted in between faster tempi: the resulting fluctuating tempi symbolizes the rowdy crew, working on the railway bursting into the folksong-like section at *piu mosso* (m.148) "We've got/ Six hundred miles to lay with rail." In the *Epilogue*, the changes of meters and tempi reveal emotional conflict. There are four different tempo changes in the orchestra to cover the transition between the Chinese workers' anger toward Lai Gwan and their desperate feeling of lost hope (m.26-41). In the final scene of the opera, The

Buddhist chanting is interrupted by meter and tempo changes that lead up to the episode of remembering the dead.

3. Conclusion

The journeys – from the East to West (China to Canada) and from east to west, (the railway linking Eastern and Western Canada) – involve great spans of time and distance. These journeys are depicted within the framework of Western opera that incorporates Chinese language, Chinese instruments, and Chinese thoughts. The clash of the two cultures is shown not only through the drama, but also through the juxtaposing of elements, namely different tonalities (tonal and atonal systems and pentatonic scale), of Western and Chinese instruments, and of different compositional techniques. When these elements are applied individually, they represent their own cultures with their distinct textures and timbres. The playing of the two characteristic sounds together is used in ways may express either conflict or harmony.

CHAPTER VI

The Orchestra in *Iron Road*

The orchestra in *Iron Road* serves the same function as that of an orchestra in traditional Chinese opera. Chan confines his orchestra primarily to supporting the three main elements of the opera: song, speech, and action. He makes little use of orchestra for elaborated instrumental music.

In Chan's opera, there is an integration of Chinese and Western instruments. He brings the instruments from the two different musical cultures together in such a way that each is able not only to maintain its own identity but also to co-exist harmoniously with the others. In the instances where Chinese and Western instruments are not played in combination, Chan employs diverse styles of Chinese and Western music writing to achieve a juxtaposition of the two cultures. However, Chan's treatment of instruments results in collaboration rather than fusion. There are instances at which the Chinese and Western instrument play independently of one another; it seems inevitable that the Western instruments should represent Western characters and Chinese instruments, Chinese.

1. The Melodic Orchestra in *Iron Road*

Instead of using the standard melodic instruments of the Chinese opera (see Chapter II, *A Study of Chinese Opera*), Chan has replaced one Chinese melodic instruments with another: the *jinghu* by the *zhonghu*, and added the *dizi*, *guzheng*, and

yangqin – not included in the Chinese melodic orchestra – that produce distinct tone colours that cannot be reproduced by Western instruments. Chan has selected the *guzheng* (a plucked instrument) and the *yangqin* (a hammered instrument) because each has more than ten strings and is, therefore, more suited to the larger Western orchestra than are the two- or four-stringed, plucked instruments that suffice the Chinese orchestra in its more intimate theatre setting.

2. The Functions of the Melodic Orchestra in *Iron Road*

The instruments that Chan uses to accompany singing, in his equivalent of the Chinese melodic orchestra, establish, maintain, and terminate the atmospheric and emotional states. The *dizi*, with its wide range (sweet to piercing), mainly follows the sung melody in a higher octave while the *erhu* accompanies the sung melody with elaborated contour lines. The melody can pass between the five instruments with, or without, overlapping, but principally between the *dizi* and *erhu*. The *guzheng* and *yangqin* while providing expansion of the melody, alone of the melodic instruments add their comment to the percussive instruments in support of speech and action. Although the melodic orchestra often plays in conjunction with the percussive orchestra, it also acts in some cases with a certain degree of independence.

A result of the melodic support of the vocal lines by Chinese instruments is a thin linear texture that emulates the sound of Chinese music. There are two scenes in the opera composed for Chinese instruments alone, which support a voice, or voices, melodically. In *The Old World*, the Chinese melodic instruments (*dizi*, *erhu*, *guzheng*, and *yangqin*)

intertwine with the vocal line, sometimes in unison and sometimes with elaboration, punctuated occasionally by the Chinese percussion, as in *Ah Lum and Ah Charn* (Act II, Scene 3). The Chinese instruments (*dizi*, *guzheng*, *yangqin*) in this scene double each other in unison creating a thin texture to accompany rhymed speech. The former scene takes place in China, the country of origin for the workers, and is associated with Old World values – principally Ama’s faith in her husband. The latter scene reprises the Old World values and the traditional Chinese view of life – the Chinese workers, Ah Lum and Ah Charn, allow their fates to be determined by gambling; and Manli, who is seeking to redeem himself for having discarded his old country values, reveals his basic retention of Chinese traditional ideas.

The traditional Chinese way of giving melodic support to the vocal line is taken up throughout the opera by the Western instruments to create the mixed Chinese and Western sound. For instance, Manli, a Chinese character who has separated himself from the other Chinese workers, is rarely accompanied by Chinese melodic instruments, although his Chinese background is hinted at, mostly by the linear accompaniment on various Western instruments. He is mainly accompanied by the clarinet, with accentuated rhythmic patterns on Chinese percussive instruments. In *The Fight* (m.7-22, 31-35), Manli’s voice, intertwining with gradual ascending and descending contours on the clarinet and punctuated by rhythmic Chinese percussion, portrays his mixed feelings of embarrassment and guilt, as evidenced by his expressing shame and his defensiveness being known as Lai Gwan’s father. He is guilty of abandoning his family and embarrassed at having the truth uncovered in front of the Chinese workers he looks down

upon. Here, the combination of Western melodic and Chinese percussive instruments paints a picture of a man in a state of emotional conflict.

3. The Percussive Orchestra in *Iron Road*

The percussive orchestra has a highly important role to play in *Iron Road*. That is evident not only in the number of percussive instruments employed but also in the manner of their use. Although the percussive orchestra in *Iron Road* does sometimes open an instrumental prelude as it would in Chinese opera, it does not likewise indicate the meter for the sung passages. Chan uses it in its customary principal Chinese role as punctuation for singing, speech, and action – with, and without, the melodic orchestra. When it is used without the melodic orchestra, it is usually accompanying action or spoken rhymed passages where it plays in regular, irregular or syncopated patterns. In China, the use of percussive instruments is associated with special occasions, especially religious and festive events. Chan imitates that traditional use of those instruments when he wishes to establish the atmosphere for certain events in the opera, but he adds various Western percussive instruments, chosen as their timbre and characteristics suit the specific circumstances.

4. The Use of Percussive Instruments

Comparing Chan's use of the percussion to that in Chinese opera (see Chapter II, *A Study of Chinese Opera*), we find that his requires a wider range of percussive instruments. Including Western percussive instruments, there are more than twenty in Chan's orchestra: hand bells, cow bell, tam-tam, low/high tom, temple wood block, crash cymbals, nipple gong, bend up gong, Chinese drum, glock, vibraphone, marimba, triangle, timpani, castanets, anvil, crotales, slapstick, train whistle, chime, bamboo chime, claves, jawbones, tubulabells, thunder sheet, high/low metal, mark tree, cuica, and snare drum. Some of them even appear in different pitch-ranges and sizes. Consequently, Chan's percussive orchestra is well able to produce an extensive variety of timbres in a mixture of Chinese and Western influenced sounds.

5. The Functions of the Percussive Orchestra in *Iron Road*

In *Iron Road* the major function of the percussive orchestra's major function is to provide introductions and punctuation, much as in Chinese opera. Chan has taken those functions and modified them for symbolic purposes; the use of the percussive orchestra and all of its various functions have been modified to a greater or lesser degree. As well, having altered the components of the percussive orchestra; and having at his disposal for punctuation an expanded range of percussive instruments (Chinese and Western), Chan can deploy a more colourful texture than that found in Chinese opera. When enhancing the dramatic action, he employs the conventions of the Chinese operatic percussive

orchestra in an innovative way, creating a sonic fabric that couples a Chinese sound with a Western flavour. I shall now discuss the functions of the percussive orchestra in detail.

I. The Percussive Introduction and Ending

For the opening and closing of a scene Chan gives his percussive instruments passages that are briefer and simpler in texture than their traditional equivalents. In place of the fairly lengthy three-part Chinese instrumental prelude – a percussive introduction, followed by an instrumental passage, and then by singing – he has in most cases substituted a short passage of brief percussive beats only, which might serve to make a proclamation, to set a scene or create an atmosphere. In those passages, he emphasizes and uses the colour (timbre) of his instruments to set the overall atmosphere of the coming scene. To close each scene, Chan has adapted a traditional usage from the very end of a Chinese opera: the “rough blow”¹, the equivalent to a final curtain, consisting of rapid figures that in his hands may evoke urgency, or surprise. Since the passage also serves as a bridge or transition between scenes, it may be both a conclusion of a scene and an introduction to the next.

Traditionally, the Chinese gong would be used to denote a ceremonial opening. Adapting that conventional usage in his beginning and ending of scenes, Chan will generally use an extra large tam-tam, or an extra large bass drum at the opening. Thus, an extra large tam-tam announces the beginning of the opera and opens the first scene, *The*

¹ Elizabeth Wichmann, *Listening to Theatre*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991, p. 261.

Old World. The opening tam-tam is soon followed by Buddhist chanting to the accompaniment of high temple blocks, mimicking the chanting in groups of sixteenth notes, and of a hand bell accenting alternately the first and the third beats for colour contrast (m.1-13). Then a massive strike on the tam-tam, which contrasts with a passage of Buddhist chanting, introduces the entrance of a Chinese instrumental prelude.

Although Chan, in this case, follows the basic structure of the percussive introduction (as stated before) to the instrumental prelude that precedes the entrance of sung melody, his version of a percussive introduction is more economical than that of Chinese opera. In *The Dream*, three strikes on an extra large bass drum at the opening of the scene suggest Lai Gwan's dreamlike state, and a large tam-tam at her entrance sounds to recall her to the real world (see example 1).

EXAMPLE 1: Act II, Prologue, *The Dream*, m. 1-4 & 110

The musical score for Example 1 consists of two systems. The first system (measures 1-4) features Glock, XL Bass Drum, and Vibraphone. The second system (measure 110) features Large Tam-Tam, Harp, and Soprano. The Soprano part includes the lyrics: "Just a girl now_ Less than noth - thing".

System 1 (Measures 1-4):

- Glock:** Measures 1-4, starting with a first ending bracket (1) and a dynamic marking of *P*.
- XL Bass Drum:** Measures 1-4, starting with a dynamic marking of *ff* and a dynamic marking of *P*.
- Vibraphone:** Measures 1-4, with a dynamic marking of *P*.

System 2 (Measure 110):

- Large Tam-Tam:** Measure 110, with a dynamic marking of *P*.
- Harp:** Measure 110, with a dynamic marking of *P*.
- Soprano:** Measure 110, with a dynamic marking of *P*. The lyrics are "Just a girl now_ Less than noth - thing".

The scene ends with a rapid figure on extra large bass drums to build up a sense of anxiety leading to next scene, *The Fight* (see example 2).

EXAMPLE 2: Act II, Prologue, *The Dream*, m.128-129

The musical score for Example 2 consists of two systems. The first system (measures 128-129) features Bass Drum and XL Bass Drum parts. The second system (measures 128-129) features XL Bass Drum and Timp. parts.

System 1 (Measures 128-129):

- Bass Drum:** Measures 128-129, with a dynamic marking of *ff*.
- XL Bass Drum:** Measures 128-129, with a dynamic marking of *ff*.

System 2 (Measures 128-129):

- XL Bass Drum:** Measures 128-129, with a dynamic marking of *ff*.
- Timp.:** Measures 128-129, with a dynamic marking of *ff*.

Sometimes, at the opening of a scene, Chan employs wood blocks, claves, or cowbells to create a sense of serenity. In *The Ship*, three simple strikes on the high woodblock indicate the opening of the scene and serve as a symbolic representation of the serenity of daybreak. A low drum in gradual *accelerando* passages follows as a preparation for the entry of spoken and sung speech (m.1-25). The first *accelerando* passage is played on a low-pitch Chinese drum and marks the entrance of the spoken dialogue. The second passage is introduced by the high-pitch woodblock and guides the rhymed spoken speech that expresses hope for the end of the journey across the sea. The third passage on a Chinese crash cymbal imitates the sound of water, the drinking water that the Chinese migrant workers no longer have. Employing different instruments in progression, Chan has opened the scene with the sounding of wood blocks to indicate the time of day as in the old Chinese custom,² and continued by using a drum to usher in dialogue and speech, and then cymbals to express the desperate circumstance on the ship.

As an alternative to using a single instrument to mark an opening, Chan will at times combine various instruments as means of raising excitement or tension. In *The Fight*, a combination of various Chinese percussive instruments, high and medium Chinese drums, low and high-pitch wood blocks, and Chinese cymbals plays the two-bar introduction to the scene. The brief opening passage, starting with a rapid drum roll and

² In ancient China, a figure much like the town crier in the Western world would toll the hours on a struck wood block.

ending on a sudden stop, generates agitation and initiates the verbal fight between Lai Gwan and Manli.

In *Iron Dragon*, the opening is a vocal line for the CPR chorus, interspersed with a passage of accelerating snare drum beats that builds/ in anticipation of the train's arrival. Then, a consistent pattern of steady beats (Chinese crash cymbal, bend-up gong, and low and medium drums), joined by melodic instruments, introduces the sung-melodic passage (m.9-20). In *Epilogue*, the low- and high-pitch cowbells in triplet rhythm depict Smith's clumsy swinging of his hammer at the last spike. The motif is heard and repeated twice; it marks the end of the building of the CPR, and the beginning of an unknown future for the Chinese workers. Eventually, the scene – and the opera – concludes as mentioned earlier with a single strike on an extra large tam-tam, just as the opera began – without the “rough blow” of Chinese opera.

To set the main theme for each scene and establish its overall emotional state Chan makes sensitive use of the colours of his percussive instruments, together with certain rhythmic patterns. Contrasts in colour and motion in the musical links between one scene and the next give a sense of ebb and flow. Employing contrasts in timbre and texture in his percussive orchestra at scene changes, Chan marks the change of setting but at the same time lends fluidity to the dramatic development. For example the *Tunnel Month* scene ends on the sound of a large tam-tam resembling an explosion which is followed by a single strike on the claves, taking the audience into the following scene, *The Cave*. Moreover, the recurrence at the very ending of the opera of that single strike on

the extra large tam-tam of the very beginning ties the two together, creating a sense of balance and at the same time implying reconciliation.

II. The Percussive Punctuation

Percussive punctuation has many uses: (1) to provide accompaniment, (2) to provide connectives, (3) to mark aural punctuation, (4) to provide transition, (5) to set the mood and create atmosphere, and (6) to provide sound effects. When compared with that of scene openings, the instrumentation of percussive punctuation is more complex in both texture and colour. It has a distinct linear texture, created by rhythmic patterns played by various combinations of percussive instruments.

a. To provide accompaniment

In the manner of Chinese opera, Chan uses percussive instruments to accompany song, speech, and action. They may be combined with melodic instruments to accompany song, or particular percussive instruments may be given steady beats or various rhythmic patterns to accompany speech and action. The most commonly used percussive instruments for steady beats are wood blocks. The beats are steady quarter notes struck either on each beat, suggesting recitation, or on each down beat, creating dramatic stress. Changing the beats to different instruments, such as castanets, marimba, and timpani, creates colour changes to accord with the intensity of different emotional states and situations. In *The Old World*, a series of beats alternating between high wood blocks and castanets, in conjunction with Chinese melodic instruments, accompanies by Lai Gwan and Ama's duet. As the emotion of the duet intensifies, the rhythmic pattern changes and

the percussive accompaniment switches from castanets and wood blocks to bend-up (rising pitch in a high register) gong and Chinese crash cymbals (m.66-73).

In *The Ship*, percussive instruments provide two kinds of accompaniment for the rhymed lyrical speech (in exaggerated tonal inflection with no musical pitch but strong rhythm). First, the percussion plays steady beats on wood blocks only (m.18-27). Secondly, it plays a regular rhythmic pattern, while emphasizing rhymed words on gong and crash cymbals to highlight their dramatic effect (m. 40-41). The dialogue, in contrast to the lyrical speech, is punctuated by varying, irregular rhythmic patterns that suggest the dramatic action (m.55-67). Thus, regular beats and rhythmic patterns provide a steady flow for song and rhymed spoken speech, while freer, varied rhythmic patterns give a sense of the physical stage action.

By varying the tempo and the combinations of percussive instruments from scene to scene, Chan is able to use steady beat accompaniment to set moods and make distinctions between characters. A high-pitched woodblock, in *The Mountain*, accompanying a passage of sung speech (Chinese workers), provides a suggestion of a metronome by punctuating the down beats on the marimba and Chinese melodic instruments. The woodblock adds a lively quality of recitative to the sung passage and contrasts with Manli's lyrical vocal lines (m. 80-83). In *The Camp*, the timpani plays a series of slow, steady beats on the downbeat only (the first and the third beats) to convey the Chinese workers' feelings of despair (m. 4-19). Further on in the scene, regular beats on each single beat, played on wood blocks, are used to give a measured narrative quality

to Lai Gwan's sung speech, a type of speech which is less lyrical than song but which has musical pitches and the same rhythmic pattern for each phrase (m. 214-217).

b. To provide connectives:

Together with melodic instruments (Chinese and Western), the percussive orchestra provides connectives between sung lines, actions, speech, and dialogue and, by so doing, ensures the integrity of the music and drama, and intensifies the meaning of the words of the libretto. Connectives often make an appearance as quick figures that, as the rhythm intensifies, create a propulsive force. The percussion connectives in *The Old World* are only one bar in length, serving to end one piece of dialogue and to lead to the entry of the next singing line (see example 3, m. 65). A close connection between phrases is made by a series of rapid drum rolls (see example 4, m. 55-59).

EXAMPLE 3: Act I, Prologue, *The Old World*, m. 65

The musical score for Example 3 consists of two staves of Percussion. The top staff is labeled "Bend-up Gong" and contains a single note with a triplet bracket above it. The bottom staff is labeled "Med. Chinese Drum", "Lo Chinese Drum", and "Hi Wood Blk". It contains a sequence of notes: a series of eighth notes, a triplet of eighth notes, and a sextuplet of eighth notes. The triplet and sextuplet are marked with brackets and the numbers 3 and 6 respectively.

EXAMPLE 4: Act I, Prologue, *The Old World*, m.55-59

The musical score for Example 4, Act I, Prologue, *The Old World*, measures 55-59, is presented in two systems. The top system is for Percussion, and the bottom system is for Chorus. The Percussion part consists of six staves, each with a different instrument: Crash Chinese Cym, Lo Chinese Drum, Hi Wood Bk, Med. Chinese Drum, Erhu, and Guzheng. The Chorus part consists of two staves: Chorus: Spoken and Chorus: Ah. The score is in 2/4 time and features a driving rhythmic pattern of rapid beats on Chinese drums. The dynamics range from *f* to *ff*. The Chorus: Ah part is marked *mp*.

The percussion may play rhythmic patterns that serve as structural markers to drive the music forward. In *The Ship*, groups of rapid rhythmic beats on Chinese drums knit fragmentary spoken passages together, with a driving force of mounting intensity between spoken and sung speeches (see example 5).

EXAMPLE 5: Act I, Scene 2, *The Ship*, m. 66-69

66

Bend-Up Gong

Bend-Down Gong

Percussion

Med. Chinese Drum

Lo Wood Blocks

AH LUM:
(I'll wipe that smile off your face!)

Chinese Chorus

68

Perc.

Perc.

B.

Fight Fight Fight (Push and Shove)

da da da tur tur y(own) y(own)

打打打 推推擁擁

In *The Camp*, percussive figures, which for the most part are different from one another, connect the argumentative singing between the two contrasted characters (Lai Gwan and Manli) (see example 6).

EXAMPLE 6: Act I, Scene 6, *The Camp*, m. 276-285

276 Bend-Down Gong

Percussion choke

Percussion Hi W.B. Hi Chinese Drum

Soprano (Who is responsible for this?)

Bass

279 Bend-Down Gong choke

Perc. Hi W.B.

Perc. Hi W.B. Bass Drum

S. mp f f

B. (So, you lead this mob. Speak!)

I should have known 你帶頭 認唔認
 lay die t(out) ying mm ying

282 Bend-Up Gong

Perc. Hi W.B.

S. Lai Gwan f (Bookman no more work from us) 3

大佬我地唔做喇
 die low ngorr day mm joe lark

284 Bend-Down Gong

Perc. 3

Perc.

S. Not until we get some food 3

church fay y(out) duck sick la

c. To provide punctuation:

The percussive orchestra is also used to make a kind of aural punctuation mark that appears at regular, or irregular, intervals for syntactical purposes,³ and that may be equated variously to commas, periods, and question marks. Percussive punctuation can also 'double' words for dramatic stress. It can serve an interruption to indicate surprise or urgency. The degree of dramatic effect is modified or augmented according to the way the instrument is used. In addition, the percussive orchestra punctuates stage action as a means of heightening dramatic effect. In *The Ship*, a particular rhythmic pattern occurring repeatedly on various instruments (Chinese medium and low drums, wood blocks, Chinese crash cymbals, and gong) serves as commas between phrases, to clarify the meaning of the dialogue (m.127-159).

In *The Mountain*, rhythmic passages – a series of drum rolls, or rhythmic patterns on multiple percussion – function at different times as periods marking an ending, as an interruption expressing surprise, or as an accent to emphasize vocal tone. Percussive instruments punctuate the words with the same rhythmic pattern on Chinese drum and pitches on marimba to stress dramatic effects (see example 7).

³ Wichmann, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

EXAMPLE 7: Act I, Scene 4, *The Mountain*, m.128-129

Chinese Cymbal

Percussion

Lo W.B.

Lo W.B.

mp Lo W.B. Lo Drum f p

Percussion

mf Marimba f

Manli (come, come....) (This will bebefit you all)

Bass

like la like la like la gum s(aunt) gor gor y(out)
 黎啦黎啦黎啦 金山 個個有

In correspondence with the clarinet (in ascending figuration), the bend-down gong (sounding a falling pitch) plays the first percussive passage that functions as an opener to Manli's proclamation, "Hello, friends/ Now that your journey has come to an end"; then, the second – accelerando – passage on the bend-up gong (sounding a rising pitch) functions as a period, marking the end of his proclamation (see example 8).

EXAMPLE 8: Act I, Scene 3, *The Mountain*, m.1-9

Clarinet in A

Percussion

Percussion

Bass

Cl.

Perc.

Perc.

B.

ff [Bend-up Gong] 3

Bend-Down Gong

[Hi W. B.] f

3

Manji f

Hel-lo,

Cl.

Perc.

Perc.

B.

f

ff

3

3

5

3

friends! Now that your jour - ney has come to an

Cl.

Perc.

Perc.

B.

sfz

[Ch. Crash Cym.]

mp

f

3

3

3

end

A series of drum rolls along with Chinese melodic instruments appears at the end of

A rhythmic one-bar pattern on multiple percussion provides syntactical punctuation to Manli's singing lines, implying a sarcastic tone (see example 10).

EXAMPLE 10: Act I, Scene 4, *The Mountain*, m. 321-325

Percussion 1: Bend-Up Gong

Percussion 2: Lo Drum, Lo W.B., Hi W.B.

Percussion 3: *fff* Snare Dr., Hi Cow Bell

Bass: *fff* Rim shot, Lo Cow Bell, Bass Drum

So here's... a spe - cial job...

Chan frequently emphasizes words in two ways for dramatic stress: one is to underscore the word with the same rhythm as the spoken word, and the other is to stretch the tone of voice with a percussive roll. In *The Dream*, the tone in which the voice sings “you” is underlined by a rapid roll on wood blocks; and the voice singing, “Shame to ancestor, Shame to father”, is punctuated by timpani with the same rhythm as that of the voice (see example 11).

EXAMPLE 11: Act II, Prologue, *The Dream*, m. 79-80

79 Chinese Cym.

Percussion

Percussion

Percussion

Soprano & Alto

You! (Shame to ancestor) You! (Shame to father)

lay derbutjeer s(eam)teen lay derbutjeerjoeseen

你 對不住上天 你 對不住祖先

In *The Fight*, the percussion punctuates by doubling the word and by stressing the word with a quick drum roll. Manli's proclamation, "We are a family," is doubled and accented by Chinese drums, and Lai Gwan's objection in response is stressed by wood blocks (m. 33-34). There is heavy punctuation from the Chinese drums on each word as Lai Gwan exclaims, "Mother is dead" (m. 39). Later, a rapid figure on the timpani gives dramatic stress twice to the word "great" (m. 54-55).

In *The Camp*, percussive punctuation heightens emotion. A single stroke on the Chinese cymbals serves as a comma to articulate Lai Gwan's compassion as she sings, "Take the body away, (Chinese cymbals)/ Let's be warm and forget," (m. 89-91). Wood block and bend-up gong make an end of the chaos that is the expression of the Chinese workers' hatred of Nichol (m. 90-92). To emphasize their anger, Chinese crash cymbals

and wood blocks stress the chorus' cry of 'gweilo' in unison (m. 189-192, 201-202, 205, 210). Instead of using percussive orchestral instruments (Chinese and Western), rice bowls and pots are used, particularly by the Chinese workers to bring attention to their rage (m. 238-244). Two quick strikes on the high-pitch tam-tam and bass drum have the effect of a question mark as Lai Gwan sings "You know why we strike?" They are followed by a further two strikes to mark an end as she sings, "We're sick of being treated like dogs," (see example 12).

EXAMPLE 12: Act I, Scene 6, *The Camp*, m. 319-323

The musical score for Example 12 consists of three systems of staves. The first system (measures 319-320) features two Percussion staves and a vocal line for Lai Gwan. The top Percussion staff has a 'Med. Temp. Blk.' and 'Hi Temp. Blk.' box above it, with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The middle Percussion staff has a 'Bass Drum' box above it, with a single eighth note followed by a rest. The vocal line for Lai Gwan starts with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic, then a forte (*f*) dynamic, and the lyrics 'You know why we' are written below the notes. The second system (measures 321-323) features two Percussion staves and a vocal line for a Soloist (S.). The top Percussion staff has 'Hi Tom' and 'Bass Drum' boxes above it, with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The middle Percussion staff has 'Hi Tom' and 'Bass Drum' boxes above it, with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The vocal line for the Soloist starts with a single eighth note, then a rest, then a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, and the lyrics 'strike We're sick of be-ing treat-ed like dogs.' are written below the notes.

Apart from highlighting emotions, the percussive instruments, as in Chinese opera, may punctuate movement for dramatic stress: there is an example in *Ah Lum and Ah Charn*: the three quarter beats denote the head shaking of Ah Lum and Ah Charn (m. 9, 12).

d. To provide transition:

Percussive transitional passages are used mainly to indicate changes of mood or setting, mostly as brief passages in accelerating tempo. In *The Stream*, there is a transitional passage made of two musical phrases. The first one begins on the *cuíca* and woodblock with the momentum of triplets against two, and ends with one stroke on the bend-up gong; that phrase is immediately followed by the second on Chinese crash cymbals in sixteenth notes. Moving from triplets to sixteenth, the increasing speed marks Manli and Lai Gwan's exit [with Manli dragging Lai Gwan away] and leads straight to Nichol's aria accompanied by harpsichord expressing his feeling for Lai Gwan (m.109-111). In *The Camp* again, a two-bar gradual *accelerando* passage of two against three (on bend-down gong, cymbals, and woodblocks) marks the transition from the Chinese workers' nostalgic thoughts of their homeland to the realization that they cannot go home as they are broke and on to their turning their resentment on to Nichol (m.182-183).

e. To set the mood and create atmosphere:

Chan has imitated the Chinese opera tradition of setting mood and atmosphere with percussion. In it, the percussive orchestra is usually assigned set types of rhythmic figures, such as a gradual *accelerando* passage to convey a sense of urgency, or a slow passage with steady beats to express a somber mood. In *The Camp* gradual *accelerando*

passages with a sudden stop create a sense of suspense, building dramatic tension, as Lai Gwan is about to find out that the bookman is her father. In *The Mountain*, after the explosion, slow steady quarter beats on a low-pitch drum create a solemn mood for the dead, they are soon followed by a one-bar drum roll to create tension when Manli asks, “Who will volunteer for the basket [with dynamite]?” (m.309-315). The combination of these two one-bar passages, slow count beats and drum roll, makes a quick change of mood to suggest great dramatic stress. Gradual accelerando passages with a sudden stop create a sense of suspense, building dramatic tension as Lai Gwan is about to find out that the bookman is her father (see example 13).

EXAMPLE 13: Act I, Scene 4, *The Mountain*, m.157-163

The musical score for Example 13, Act I, Scene 4, *The Mountain*, measures 157-163, is presented in a multi-staff format. The score includes the following parts and markings:

- Percussion (Measures 157-163):**
 - Staff 1: Chinese Cym. (Measures 157-158), Chinese Cym. (Measures 160-161).
 - Staff 2: Lo W.B. (Measures 157-158), Hi W.B. (Measures 159-160), *p* (Measures 161-163).
- Vocal Parts (Measures 157-163):**
 - Lai Gwan: "What's yours[name]?" (Measures 157-163).
 - Manli: (Measures 157-163).
 - S. (Soprano): *ff* (Measures 160-163).
 - B. (Bass): *mf* (Measures 160-163), "Call me Book-man boy" (Measures 160-163).
- Percussion (Measures 160-163):**
 - Staff 3: Perc. (Measures 160-161), Bend-Up Gong (Measures 162-163), Chinese Cym. (Measures 160-161).
 - Staff 4: Perc. (Measures 160-163), *ff* (Measures 160-163).

In addition, Chan adopts a typical Chinese use of percussive instruments to establish the atmosphere for religious and festive events in the opera. However, because he uses a wider range of instruments and makes innovative additions, he is able to paint a typical Chinese setting that is more colourful in texture and timbre. In the prologue of Act I and in the *Epilogue*, Chan elaborates upon the Buddhist chanting with four-part harmony, replacing the characteristic monophony of the chant, while accompanying it with the typical instruments, hand bell and woodblock, used in funeral chants. In *Iron*

Dragon, a perpetual rhythmic pattern on the Chinese drums, in conjunction with melodic support from both Chinese and Western instruments and choruses, generates a vivacious air suited to the depiction of the festivity of the dragon dance. It is a celebration joined in by the East and West – a moment of harmony – hence, the Chinese and Western instruments (m. 11-).

f. To provide sound effects:

Instrumental sound effects are important in Chinese opera for their use in symbolic scene setting. In addition to the various functions mentioned above that Chan has borrowed from Chinese opera, the percussive instruments imitate recognizable natural and artificial sounds just as they would in Chinese opera. In *The Mountain*, a loud noise from a mixture of cymbals, drums, timpani, extra large tam-tam, and thunder sheet mimics the sound of an explosion (m. 258, 271, 304-306, 412-413); and a relay of metal mallets (anvil, “brake” drum) creates a sound picture of the laying down of railway track, and the placing of spikes (m. 260-292).

6. Conclusion

The percussive orchestra provides the introductions and endings to scenes, and adds aural punctuation and connectives to singing, speech, dialogue, and action. Dramatically, it highlights scenic transitions, and verbal and physical expression. Chan’s way of introducing the opening scenes is more economical than that of the Chinese opera in which the traditional introduction is made up of a percussive passage followed by an instrumental prelude (melodic and percussive) to introduce the entry of a sung melodic

passage. Instead of the long narrative of Chinese opera, Chan uses only a brief motif, or figure, to represent a particular atmosphere, or to announce an instrumental prelude, speech, or sung melodic passage. For punctuation purposes, Chan sometime borrows particular punctuation figures directly from Chinese opera and uses them to express certain moods, to highlight the meaning of words, to make connections between phrases (speech and song), and to accompany actions. In most cases, he transmutes Chinese traditional usage by varying the ways they are applied and by employing a wider range of instruments (Chinese and Western). By employing and adapting traditional Chinese percussive orchestra usage for his introductions, endings, and punctuation, Chan has used his percussive orchestra in *Iron Road* to build a structural framework whose distinct rhythmic sound runs through the whole opera.

CHAPTER VII

The Influence of Chinese Cosmological Concepts on the Musical Structure

Chan's interpretation of Chinese concepts in musical terms paves the way for combining traditional Chinese thoughts, religions, and aesthetic principles with Western and Chinese compositional techniques. As mentioned in the Chapter IV, *The Role of Chinese Traditions in Iron Road: A Study of the Characters*, the traditions of Chinese culture originated in the ancient worldview that rationalizes the ever-moving cyclic processes of the universe and bipolarity of nature.¹ According to Teiser, all things are made of *qi* (or *chi*) which "was thought to move or to operate according to a pattern that did conform to two basic modes" – *yin* and *yang*.² The concept of *yin* and *yang* was first conceived by Chinese thinkers who believed, "Yin and Yang are two complimentary, interdependent principles, or phases, alternating in space and time; they are emblems evoking the harmonious interplay of all pairs of opposites in the universe."³ The contrasting energies embodied through *yin* and *yang* are exemplified throughout the opera in the juxtaposition of two different cultural values/musical elements of the East and the West.

¹ Laurence G. Thompson, *Chinese Religion*, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996, p. 1.

² Donald S. Jr. Lopez, ed., *Religions of China in Practice*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 32-33.

³ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Vol.28, p. 387.

1. The Juxtaposition of Contrasting Values

“[Y]in and yang can be used to understand the modulations of qi on a mountainside as well as the relationship within the family. The social hierarchies of gender and age, for instance – the duty of the wife to honour her husband, and of younger generations to obey older ones – were interpreted as the natural subordination of yin to yang.”⁴ Contrasting thoughts are embodied at the same time within duets by opposing sonorities in different instruments. For example, two contrasting thoughts exhibited in the opera are centred on the main character, Lai Gwan, in her encounters with her mother (Ama), her father (Manli), the Chinese workers, and her lover (Nichol). Although Lai Gwan and her mother both believe in Chinese traditional values, their approaches differ: one (Ama) is passive and the other (Lai Gwan) active – she takes charge of herself. The conflict between Lai Gwan and her father arises from different values; one discards his past while the other holds on to her Chinese roots. The goal of Lai Gwan’s journey is different from that of the Chinese workers: while they look for a new future, Lai Gwan searches for her past in the father who is more important to her than ‘Gold Mountain’. Finally, Lai Gwan’s view of self-expression is contrary to Nichol’s: while Nichol believes in expressing his true feeling, Lai Gwan will not allow herself the freedom to give way to her love for Nichol, a forbidden “*gweilo*”.

In terms of the idea of *yin* and *yang*-like contrasts, there are five scenes (*The Prologue, The Ship, The Camp, Iron Dragon, and The Dream*) where the contrasting thoughts are expressed musically by Lai Gwan and one or other of the previously mentioned dualities of mother, father, etc. In Act I, Prologue, *The Dream*, while Ama

⁴ Lopez, *op. cit.*, p. 32-33.

expresses her faith in her husband who has abandoned them and her belief that he will return, Lai Gwan, not believing he will ever come back, tells of her decision to go to search of her father in the New Land. The contrasting thoughts (negative and positive) of the mother and daughter are depicted by the voices, one following the other, to melodic support on Chinese instruments. The *erhu* gives articulation to Ama's singing of the importance of the Chinese traditions while the *guzheng* elaborates upon Lai Gwan's singing of a new approach to the traditional ways. The melodic lines of the two voices, together with their instrumental accompaniments, intertwine expressing the contrasting thoughts of mother and daughter but at the same time conveying an overall sense of unity.

The contrast in thoughts between Lai Gwan and the Chinese workers is displayed in various scenes in the opera. At the beginning of her journey to the New Land (*The Ship*), she sings of her thoughts of Manli in lyrical lines made up of long sustained notes to the accompaniment of a flute in a register an octave higher (m.116-124, 139-150). The Chinese workers, meanwhile, express their joyful anticipation of reaching the New Land in a lively rhythm accompanied by all the woodwinds, except the flute (m.100-115, 125-end). Their melodic lines contrast in texture with the Chinese percussion supporting both to unify the two melodies.

A similar representation of the conflicting thoughts of Lai Gwan and the Chinese workers reappears in *The Camp*. While the workers mourn the death of their comrades and fear for their future, Lai Gwan worries about finding her father and shows concern about *her* future. This time the juxtaposition of the different thoughts is conveyed by different languages and by different instrumentation. Chinese instruments accompany the

Chinese workers' melody; the steady beats in the percussion create a grave atmosphere while the *erhu* and oboe supply melodic support (see example 1).

EXAMPLE 1: Act I, Scene 6, *The Camp*, m. 4-8

The musical score for Example 1 consists of three staves: Percussion, Tenor, and Bass. The Percussion staff is marked with a box containing 'Timp.' and 'Bow XL-Tam-Tam'. The notation shows a steady rhythmic pattern with a dynamic marking of *mf* < *P* and the instruction 'Med. mallet strike rear rim'. The Tenor staff is marked 'Grave' and 'Ch. CHORUS (Another Day Another death)'. It features a melodic line with lyrics in Chinese characters and Pinyin: '無一天見到死神來' (mo yut teengeen doesay sun loy). The dynamic marking is *PP*. The Bass staff provides a supporting melodic line with the same Pinyin and Chinese characters: 'mo yut teengeen doesay sun loy' and '無一天見到死神來'.

Conversely, Lai Gwan's feelings are depicted by a staccato dance-like figuration on the flute. These two melodies eventually overlap with melodic support from the strings (m.51).

In *The Iron Dragon*, while the Canadian workers are celebrating the completion of the CPR with a drink and are anticipating reunion with their families back in the east, the Chinese workers, who are hungry for food, wonder how they will be able to return home with no more work and no more pay in prospect. Instead of being united in feeling, the two groups of workers have opposing vocal lines highlighting their contrasted emotions. The singing of the Chinese chorus is punctuated by the Chinese melodic instruments that

superimpose a feeling of despair. The scene builds to a conclusion at which, in a negative echoing to the CPR chorus singing “My nation”, the Chinese workers retort “Your nation, Not ours,” stating a basic conflict in a tense atmosphere, (m.144-end).

In *The Dream*, an upward swift run on the strings brings Ama’s spirit into Lai Gwan’s dream urging her to remember her native traditions, (m.11-14). Ama’s voice keeps calling Lai Gwan’s name and repeating the ancient law, “Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth, / Five ancient elements that make up life,” (m.18-105) which the chorus echoes back and forth; her lines are punctuated by the spotty texture in the chorus. Nichol’s singing joins Ama’s lyrical line expressing an opposing thought, “Old ways break apart, Revealing a new life...” Although the two voices speak of opposing values, musically they are in accord (see example 2).

EXAMPLE 2: Act II, Scene 1, Prologue, *The Dream*, m.67-70

The musical score for Example 2 consists of two staves: Alto and Tenor. The Alto staff is marked with a box labeled 'Ama' and a dynamic marking of *mf*. It contains two phrases: the first is '(Lai Gwan) lai guan lai guan' with Chinese characters 鹿君 鹿君 below; the second is '(Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth) gum moak sul fir toe' with Chinese characters 金 木 水 火 土 below. The Tenor staff is marked with a box labeled 'Nichol' and a dynamic marking of *mf*. It contains the phrase 'Lai Gwan Old ways break a - part'.

“[T]he cyclical character of time and the universal rhythm and the law of return”⁵ of the ancient Chinese worldview is echoed in Chan’s recycling of previous material in later sections. The repetition of musical material gives a sense of coherence and

⁵ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Vol.28, p. 385.

The gold mountain motif is recalled in *The Mountain* as an opening to the scene; the motif is now transformed into a long stretched upward chromatic quick figure on the clarinet running over three octaves. The transformation not only recalls the hopeful dream of the future but also awakens, as it were, the Chinese workers from their 'dream' land to the reality of the 'new' land.

The Chinese workers' theme (see example 1, Chapter V, *The Musical Content*, p. 141) reappears on Chinese instruments when Manli sings the word 'beardless' as he summons the Chinese men from Guangdong province. The lively theme of the Chinese workers on Chinese instruments provides commentary as Manli's sings of the naivete of the Chinese workers' dreams. The cry of 'Gum San' from the Chinese men at the end of *The Ship* is repeated by Chinese instruments in *The Mountain* (m.62-77).

The declamatory motif on the horn at the opening of *The Iron Road* (see example 4), that announces the beginning of the construction of the CPR, is repeated at Nichol's declamation, 'We got the men. We got the will', that calls for the start of the construction of the CPR line (m.82).

EXAMPLE 4: Act I, Scene 3, *The Iron Road*, m.1-4

The musical score for Example 4 consists of two systems of staves. The first system (measures 1-4) includes parts for Trumpet in C 1 & 2, Trombone 1 & 2 Tenor/Bass, Trombone 3 Tuba, and Snare Drum. The second system (measures 3-4) includes parts for Tpt., Tbn., B. Tbn., and Snare Drum. The score features a 3/4 time signature and a key signature of one flat. Dynamics include *ff*, *rit.*, and *sfz*.

The re-use of the motif serves the same purpose as the opening declamation but is voiced differently: the opening, by trumpets with snare drum rhythmical support and the re-use by the singing voice with snare drum making punctuation between phrases (see example 5). Both declamatory motifs are soon followed by a marching passage.

EXAMPLE 5: Act I, Scene 3, *The Iron Road*, m. 82-85

The musical score for Example 5, Act I, Scene 3, *The Iron Road*, measures 82-85, is presented in a multi-staff format. The instruments and parts included are:

- Horn 1&3:** Part of the brass section, marked *ff* and *a 2*.
- Horn 2&4:** Part of the brass section, marked *ff* and *a 2*.
- Trumpet in C 1&2:** Part of the brass section, marked *ff* and *a 2*.
- Trombone 1&2:** Part of the brass section, marked *ff* and *a 2*.
- Trombone 3:** Part of the brass section, marked *ff*.
- Tuba:** Part of the brass section, marked *sfz*.
- Snare Drum:** Part of the percussion section, marked *Declamato* with a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 92$ and dynamics of *ff* and *mf*.
- Tenor:** Vocal part for the character Nichol, with lyrics: "We got the men", "Wegot the will", and "So". The dynamics are *ff* and *mf*.

The opera begins with Buddhist chanting to set the picture of Ama’s deathbed, and ends with Buddhist chanting that commemorates the sacrifices that the Chinese workers made for the building of the CPR. The opening Buddhist chanting consists of four voices of different duration; the alto in a steady continuous sixteenth notes; the soprano, tenor and bass play off the alto vocal line with sustained notes. Hand bells and temple blocks, the customary instruments used to accompany chanting in a Buddhist ritual setting, attend the voices. The chanting recurs in answer to Manli’s question, “(Their ghost will walk alone.) Who will gather their bones?” The chanting is layered with Lai Gwan’s prayer, “Wash. Wrap. Burn. Bless. Remember smashed Chinese dead...” in the arrangement of the opening Buddhist chanting. At the very end of the opera, the chanting returns once more as Lai Gwan and Manli reach reconciliation, with

one single hand bell ring on the last word “Remember”, and one final beat on the extra large tam-tam to mark the conclusion. The recurrent Buddhist chanting not only emphasizes the significance of ritual practice for the dead but also conveys symbolically a concept of the cyclic pattern of the natural world.

2. The Juxtaposition/Collaboration of the Chinese and Western Musical Elements

Another comparable notion of *yin* and *yang* is the *Five Elements* (*wu-hsing*) which is associated with “spatial directions, seasons of the year, colours, musical notes [pentatonic scale], animals, and other aspects of nature.” Literally *wu* means “five” and *hsing* means “to do, to act, to move, and to set in motion”.⁶ Sivin has quoted Jen Ying-ch’iu’s definition of *wu-hsing* as “the cyclical activity of five ch’i [*qi*] that is not five chemically or physically distinct substances, but five aspects of a process, the substance that changes character in it”.⁷ In the opera, the titles of each individual scene evoke the *Five Elements*:⁸ Metal – *The Iron Road* (or railway); Wood – *The Mountain*; Water – *The Stream*; Fire – *The Tunnel Mouth* (with the explosion); and Earth – *The Cave*. The emphasis on change is illustrated in the development of the dramatic characters as well as by the syncretisation of the Chinese and Western music.

⁵ *The New Encyclopaedia, Macropaedia*, Vol.28, p. 387.

⁶ Nathan Sivin, *Traditional Medicine is Contemporary China*, Center for Chinese Studies, USA: The University of Michigan, 1987, p. 74.

⁷ Sivin, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 76.

⁸ Note that Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth are referred to as *Five Elements* in the opera instead of *Five Phases*. It is perhaps more appropriate to think of them as phases or processes rather than base substances.

The collaboration of the Chinese and Western elements is achieved in different ways: (1) in unison, (2) by intermingling with each other, (3) by reverse role-play, (4) by parodying Chinese sounds on Western instruments, and vice versa.

In *The Ship*, the *dizi* and Chinese percussion dominate the first half of the scene; the *dizi* provides connectives between phrases while Chinese percussion punctuates rhymed speech and actions. Not until the horn call announces the sighting of the New Land do Western instruments join the Chinese instruments in unison as accompaniment to the Chinese workers theme. Lai Gwan's brief lyrical speech is trailed (without melodic support) by the *dizi* during the first half, (m.44, 48, 54), then following the horn call it is attended by the flute in unison (m.139-150). Although the scene is an example of a typical Chinese scene set by Chinese instruments, the Chinese melodic instrument, the *dizi* in this case, does not give the melodic support it normally would. Instead, the flute takes over its role and supports the melody. The participation of the Western instruments, however, gives the invitation for Chinese workers to enter the New Land.

Manli first appears on stage in the scene of *The Mountain*. He introduces himself in English and Chinese to the accompaniment of mainly by Western instruments. While his acceptance of Western influence is characterized by the clarinet, his Chinese origin is accentuated by the Chinese percussive punctuation that conveys his dramatic temperament. It is in this scene that the Chinese and Western characters first meet. The Chinese instruments still play the typical role of melodic support as the Chinese workers appear. Conversely, the Western instruments now assume the function of the Chinese percussion by sounding steady beats in eighth notes throughout the scene. At the end of

the scene, an amalgamation of all the voices – chorus, Chinese and Western instruments – expresses the unity of hope that they have finally reached.

In *The Iron Dragon*, the dragon dance is performed by the Chinese chorus and Chinese and Western instruments. A long stretched percussive passage calls up the Spirit of the Dance. The integration of Chinese and Western instruments and the chorus evoke movements for the dance (a dance is performed on the stage); the chorus depicts the celebratory atmosphere while the instruments give it articulation. The ‘Hurrah’ theme from Act I, Scene 3, *The Iron Road* (see example 6) represents the iron dragon from the Canadian East coming closer and closer to meet the Chinese dragon in the Canadian West. The Chinese melodic instruments are dismissed as soon as they meet (m. 91-92).

EXAMPLE 6: Act I, Scene 3, *The Iron Road*, m. 115-119

Tenor

Hur-rah for the brand new C. P. R. Push-ing hard through su - pe - ri - or shore So

Bass

Hur rah for the brand new C. P. R. Push-ing hard through su - pe - ri - or shore So

The dances of the two dragons (the vocal lines of Chinese and CPR chorus) begin one bar apart, but gradually overlap as the note value changes from half notes to eighth notes in the voices and from triplets to sixteenths in the orchestral accompaniment. Although the ‘two dragons’ (the Chinese and CPR choruses) intertwine with each other while voicing different thoughts, the Chinese and Western instruments conclude the scene in a harmonious fashion.

There are instances of the Western instruments mimicking the sounds of Chinese instruments. Three distinctive figures commonly used by Chinese instruments are: (1) grace notes on the melodic instruments, (2) repeated notes on the percussive instruments, and (3) the pentatonic scale on the melodic instruments. The two Chinese melodic instruments, *yangqin* and *guzheng*, play connectives between phrases and, in addition, give melodic support to the voice. Various Western instruments with similar tone colours imitate not only their sound but also their usage. In *The Mountain*, the marimba plays grace note figures as connectives, making a smooth transition between phrases and the sung lines of the characters, and also highlights the meaning of words and of subtle body movements (see example 7).

EXAMPLE 7: Act I, Scene 4, *The Mountain*, m.33-37

Marimba

Bass

mp

But so dan - ger - ous

4

Marimba

B.

Manli

And you've got no I - rish - men left

In *The Tunnel Mouth*, the harp carries the functions of both Chinese melodic instruments (*yangqin* and *guzheng*) to a different level: swift arpeggio passages on the harp elaborate the sustained notes in the vocal lines, adding emphasis to the words for dramatic effect (m.19-22, 41-42, 53-54, 71-73).

Repeated notes figures on Chinese percussion are commonly used to supply steady count beats to singing and speech, and to provide a driving force to generate emotion. In *The Mountain*, repeated notes are given to various Western instruments as steady count beats to furnish a quality of narration. They occur positioned along Manli's vocal lines on the bassoon, oboe, English horn and strings for four-bars or more in length. An exciting movement is raised when Manli announces 'Everyone, Gum Sam [Gold Mountain] calls'. These dispersed repeated note figures follow closely up on another in different registers and create an atmosphere of exhilaration.

In numerous scenes of the opera Chan employs the pentatonic scale in both the Chinese and Western vocal and instrumental parts, creating a Chinese air. The pentatonic scale conveys the sentiments of the Chinese characters, mainly Ama's in *The World* and the Chinese workers' in *The Ship*, *The Camp*, and *The Iron Dragon*. Ama's vocal lines are given melodic support by Chinese instruments while the Chinese workers' are set to a combined arrangement of Chinese and Western instruments. Consequently, a linear texture characterizes Ama's vocal lines while a rich sonority enhances the Chinese workers' singing. From time to time, the pentatonic scale gives added character to the two Chinese workers, Lai Gwan and Manli; it occupies most of their vocal lines in *The Mountain*, but gradually drifts away as they move through the scenes closer to the end of the opera – leaving the 'old world' and adapting to the 'new land'. The degree of use of the pentatonic scale provides a symbolic representation of the dramatic development of the Chinese characters.

He makes use of the characteristic aesthetic values of Chinese and Western elements – musical and cultural. He integrates the Chinese and Western techniques in

such a way that they work together, supporting each other in a harmonious fashion. As a result, although they play distinct roles in the opera and yet, as they evolve, they meet seamlessly much as *yin* and *yang* meet and interact with each other.

CONCLUSION

Iron Road is significant in many ways as a Canadian opera. Culturally, it drew together the Caucasian-Canadian and Chinese-Canadian communities in its creation and production. It captured the interest of both communities in their shared history in this land and, by telling the Chinese railway workers' experience, attracted people outside the usual audience of opera goers. Through the implementation of ***Iron Road Education Program*** by Tapestry New Opera Works in school's history, drama and music curricula, and over national broadcasts on radio, the production reached an audience beyond that of its theatre run. Musically, the integration of the art forms of two cultures is unique, and the generation of funding was noteworthy for attracting unprecedented support for a new operatic work of so large a scale.

In *Iron Road* Chan has created a musical depiction of Chinese traditions within a setting of the Canadian Rockies at a significant moment in Canadian history. In order to convey musically the qualities of each of the opera's characters in different physical and social contexts, he uses Chinese and traditional Western compositional techniques, and in doing so, reveals, as a Western trained Chinese-Canadian composer, his command of Western theory and Chinese traditional musical usage. Moreover, a basic framework, derived from the philosophical ideas of Chinese thought, permeates this integration of the two musical traditions in an opera that is of cross-cultural, social and historical significance.

1. Cultural Implications

The use of the title *Iron Road* is itself evocative of the opera. The title has the attraction of giving a new and different perspective of the Great Railway, that momentous national enterprise that retains a place of historical interest in the Canadian imagination. With “iron road,” the railway tracks are not just rails of metal but a road of iron, implying both the romance and hardship of the time, while suggesting something of the mystique of the Silk Road, but containing within in something of the relentless ring of the advent of the industrial-age.

“Iron road” is a literal translation from the Chinese word for railroad. The title itself speaks to the Chinese experience in the building of the railway, and as such, attracted those of the Chinese community who were curious about the immigration of their ancestors. There were also those who wanted to see justice done in the opera, who wanted to see the treatment of the Chinese labourers denounced. Although the setting of the opera is the building of the railway, and the well documented hardships and racism that faced the Chinese labourers, the dramatic complication deals not only with an interracial relationship acted out in the midst of a politically sensitive era of history but also with the dynamics within a Chinese family that was confronting the Western world. Nor does the opera pose a villain-versus-heroine polarity – it crosses borders.

Dramatically, the Chinese characters reveal conflicts with, and adherence to, Chinese traditions and the way they apply in dramatized real life. By showing as part of the drama the characters’ motives set against the Chinese traditions, and those characters exercising their moral decisions in the New Land, the opera successfully illustrates Chinese cultural traditions in a western context. The conclusion of the opera has the

principal characters more or less resolving their pasts and futures but it is by no means “a happy ending.” Nevertheless, it is an ending that highlights Chinese values but yet is in accord with many western values. However, it is to be regretted that the implementation of an interracial relationship is not given enough development, even though it was Chan’s initial dramatic emphasis. It had become a sensitive topic: there were concerns over the way the Chinese-Canadian community might receive such a portrayal. The history, instead of being mere backdrop, came to the forefront and nearly overshadowed the romantic narrative. The main subject became somewhat buried by social and political concerns, yet it is to Chan and Brownell’s credit that the love story retained at least some prominence.

The Chinese have a saying “Life as Theatre; Theatre as Life” It is particularly applicable to *Iron Road*. The dynamics of constructing the opera were similar to the dynamics of constructing the railway in that it took a combination of Chinese and Canadian ingenuity and labour to create them. Art imitated life, not only in the work of art but also in the process of creating it.

2. Musical Implications

Chan’s approach to the music reflects Canada’s social makeup. His way of putting elements together fits in with his upbringing and background. As in the social construct of Canada, within the opera there are borders and seams, with interaction and syncreticism (harmonious blending; a change of value and form when two elements meet) Coming to Canada as an immigrant, Chan was recognized as Chinese, yet he undertook a

study of Western music, and become attuned to western ways. In time, he turned back to rediscover his roots, drawing upon his heritage to create an original musical work.

Rather than creating a process of fusion (an alchemy where a new substance is made), the musical combines and integrates two traditions. Chan uses the two music traditions, or ideas, as tools to transform western opera form into something more expansive in scope, into something that is more than a western-style opera with token Chinese motifs. The interplay of colour and timbre make the opera distinct, while the music maintains a cultural synthesis. The opera displays Chan's heritage and Western training and particularly exhibits the integration of the two cultures in its creation. Yet, for all its cultural integration and blending, the opera reflects the quintessential quality of Canadian society - the preservation of a cultural identity within the larger whole. One of the opera's unique qualities is, of course, its very use of Chinese music, language and traditions, a quality that attracts Chinese and Canadians alike; the Chinese, because it incorporates Cantonese lyrics; and Canadians, because of the exoticism associated with Chinese opera.

The Chinese language is employed to express what English cannot express, and serves to convey Chinese thoughts. The way of thinking is peculiar to the particular phrasing and nuance of the native language. The language, in turn, has an influence on the melodic contour and, thus, becomes the bridge between the music and the characterizations. The music itself is dictated by the particular rise and fall of linguistic tones, and then becomes the primary narrative vehicle for the characters. Chan capitalizes on the natural tendency of the tone-dictating language to provide its own melody line, and

broadens the seemingly limited scope by his use of rhythm and dramatic emphasis. The Chinese language is transformed into a dramatic musical language in a Western context.

Along with the use of the Chinese language, a major Chinese component is the use of the traditional percussive orchestra from Chinese opera that provides a greater sonic richness and wider expanse of timbre with the blending of Chinese and Western instruments. In addition to denoting entrances and exits and scene transitions, the percussive orchestra highlights verbal and physical expression. The employment of Chinese percussion is especially appropriate to this opera in setting mood and atmosphere. Within the background of hard labour, the metallic cacophony of railway building is amply conveyed in the full range of sound textures provided by the percussive orchestra. Everything from dynamite explosions to spiking rails is given a musicality far more expressive than mere, conventional sound effects.

Within *Iron Road*, there is a progression toward convergence, reflecting not only Chan's own experience but also touching upon the experiences of the many other Chinese immigrants in Canada. He has not refrained under Western influence from asserting his Chinese cultural heritage, and even reminds his audience of Chinese tradition through his particular orchestral sound, created with the use of traditional Chinese and Western musical elements. Indeed, he has reinterpreted both Chinese and Western musical terms and concepts, and found cross-cultural conceptual parallels in them, and imbued them with an aesthetic value that eschews mere superficiality. As a response to the Chinese traditions and Western influence, Chan's syncretic process "involves both changes of value and form."¹ His transmutation of Chinese traditions into a Western context can be

¹ Alan Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 314.

seen as two processes of “westernization” as well as “modernization”², (a process in which traditional melodies and instruments are used but with Western harmony, notation, and performing practices) and “modernization”³ (a process in which traditional musical values and styles are maintained while western instruments and techniques are employed). From the involvement of these two processes in his syncretic method of composition, one can assume that Chan wishes to retain both the traditions that he has inherited and those to which he has become acculturated. Of most significance in ***Iron Road*** is his aesthetic treatment in his music of those two distinct traditions and his transformation of the contradictions and conflicts between them to bring them together into the happy state that is the reconciliation of oppositions.

² Bruno Nattl, *World Music in the Twentieth Century: A Survey of Research on Western Influence*, ACTA Musicologica 58/2, July-December, 1986, p. 373.

³ *Loc. cit.*

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