

Cultural bridges: Traditional Chinese orchestras in Canada

In the current climate of “Asian hate” and xenophobia, it is even more urgent to shine a light on the experience of the Chinese diaspora in Canada in the hopes of building understanding and creating community. For immigrants, music is an important link to their homeland and serves to bring people together and preserve cultural heritage. Not only that, it is a means of connecting people across cultures as we search for commonalities in our diverse country.

Traditional Chinese orchestras are community hubs of social and cultural activities that link different generations, offer a safe and supportive space for immigrants, and allow Chinese Canadians to connect with their distant roots. The fieldwork for this research included interviews with leaders of Chinese orchestras across Canada.

HISTORY OF THE CHINESE DIASPORA

The Chinese in Canada come from various parts of Asia. As a result, they not only vary culturally and linguistically, but also include several generations of Canadian-born Chinese (CBC). The first Chinese individuals arrived in Canada in the 1850s, predominantly from the Guangdong province (Toishan) in southern China. They came to Canada in search of a better life, but, instead of the promises of prosperity at Gold Mountain (named for the 1858 gold rush in British Columbia), they encountered racism, abuse, and poverty. Approximately 16,000 Chinese were recruited as cheap labour to help build Canada’s transcontinental railway. They were given the most dangerous jobs and thousands died during the railway’s construction. Although Chinese people contributed significantly to their new communities, they were still considered outcasts in society. Since 1860, discriminatory legislation was passed against the Chinese, setting an

BY PATTY CHAN

Patty Chan is the music director of the Toronto Chinese Orchestra and director of Centre for Music Innovations. She is currently an MA candidate in ethnomusicology at York University.

anti-Chinese trend in the government. In the years that followed, the government passed a head tax to discourage Chinese immigration, and in 1923 the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, banning Chinese immigration to Canada. Although the Act was repealed in 1947, only wives and children under 18 years of age could enter Canada. Discriminatory racial wordings were removed from regulations only in 1962.

With these turbulent experiences in Canada, music was a way for immigrants to escape from the harsh realities and remember their homeland. They formed benevolent societies that provided financial assistance and small arts groups that enabled both social gatherings and the strengthening of their community. For

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Chinese immigrants, there has been a long history of discrimination and perpetually feeling like the “other.”

CHINESE ORCHESTRA: HISTORY AND IMPACT

The traditional Chinese orchestra of Asia has a surprisingly short history of approximately 100 years. Before this, music served the purpose of rituals, processions, and court entertainment. The Chinese orchestra had its start in the 1920s with musicians wanting to take the best qualities of Western music and “modernize” it while retaining the roots of Chinese music. They wanted to create an orchestra that showed their national identity, and this led to the establishment of Chinese orchestras in other parts of Asia, such as Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

In the 1960s, a new wave of Chinese immigrants began to arrive in Canada. They were predominantly from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and many came to study. It was during this time that the first traditional Chinese instrumental ensembles were formed in Vancouver and Toronto. These ensembles served as a place for socializing, for escaping from the pressures of school and work, and for sharing familiar music and memories.

As a second-generation Chinese Canadian, I struggled with my identity. In school, I was sometimes the only visible minority in class and I was looked upon as a foreigner. Outside of school, the immigrant Chinese looked at me with skepticism; although I looked like them, I was not considered “authentic.” This created deep feelings of shame; I did not fit in anywhere. My parents tried to teach my siblings and me about our culture by sending us to weekly Chinese lessons for language, dance, and music. I also studied piano and violin. Although I enjoyed these instruments, I fell in love with the

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erhu (a Chinese bowed-string instrument) and eventually joined a Chinese orchestra. This not only instilled pride in me, but it also helped me to realize that being different was something positive.

CHINESE ORCHESTRA: TODAY

Currently, there are Chinese orchestras in Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto, and Montreal. They are all multigenerational, with members between the ages of 10 and 75. They bring together people from different parts of Asia, CBC, and others who are not of Chinese heritage. Over the years, each orchestra has worked hard to survive in Canada. Unlike Western symphony orchestras, there is a significant lack of suitable scores, musicians, and financial resources. There is also the challenge of engaging members with a wide range of musical abilities and ages. This highlights the fragility of the Chinese orchestra, which can easily stagnate and dissolve if it does not adapt. An application of this research has been

to connect these orchestras together to strengthen and find collective solutions to challenges rather than each struggling on their own. Not only do we need to reach the next generation, we also need to go beyond the Chinese community to learn from other cultures and to create Canadian works.

To complete this research, I conducted several interviews with Chinese orchestra leaders. Not only were they appreciative of the opportunity to share their stories, but our conversations led them to reflect on why they either formed or joined a Chinese orchestra and how the experience has impacted their lives. My interviews have also shown that these conversations are necessary. They give Chinese musicians a voice, and they offer a rare opportunity for each of them to tell their stories, open a dialogue about belonging, and provide a safe place to have honest discussions about their struggles to fit into the rich Canadian tapestry. 

INTERVIEWS

BC Chinese Orchestra
BC Youth Chinese Orchestra
Calgary Chinese Orchestra
Chinese Instrumental Music Group of Toronto
Edmonton Chinese Philharmonica Orchestra
Montreal Chinese Instrumental Ensemble
Toronto Chinese Orchestra

York Centre for Asian Research

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