

Despite its format, however, Hesketh and Hackett's CD-ROM ultimately reflects the traditional approach of Canadian historians, namely our marriage to print forms. In history, a discipline that has always begun and ended with words on paper — whether researching original documents, reading findings at conferences, or publishing conclusions in journals or books — computer technologies have been used to preserve our textual culture. For most of us, the computer has become an enhanced word processor, and related technologies such as CD-ROMs and the World Wide Web have been used as electronic scholarly journals and archives. These uses of technology have no doubt enhanced the communication and teaching of history (Hesketh and Hackett's CD-ROM, for instance, has given students one-stop access to historiography that might otherwise have been spread over several publications), but they have still essentially involved the transfer of existing materials and skills of the discipline from paper to screen.

Historian John Lutz, in an article published in these pages in 2001, called on historians to explore other ways in which computers might be used for communication and teaching (“Riding the Horseless Carriage to the Computer Revolution: Teaching History in the Twenty-first Century”, *Histoire sociale/Social History*, vol. 34, no. 2 [2001], pp. 427–436). With historian Ruth Sandwell and others, Lutz is drawing upon gaming metaphors to build web-based Canadian history mysteries. In an entirely different vein, John Bonnett, a historian at the National Research Council, has been using virtual 3-D computer reconstructions to illustrate the challenges of creating coherent explanations of the past. Digital environments come with their own set of properties, and scholars are only beginning to draw upon these to create interactive histories. Hesketh and Hackett have shown how computer technologies can artfully blend the familiar form of print with the novel form of the CD-ROM to communicate a vast quantity of contemporary scholarship, and in so doing have challenged the rest of us to consider new ways in which computer technologies might be used to teach Canadian history.

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HOE, Ban Seng — *Enduring Hardship: The Chinese Laundry in Canada*. Gatineau, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2003. Pp. iv, 86.

For most of the twentieth century, every Canadian city and town of any size had at least one Chinese laundry. In an era before automatic washers and electric irons, Chinese hand laundries provided relatively inexpensive laundry services to working and middle-class families, especially for fussy items like starched collars or nurse's caps. Despite their presence as an integral part of the urban landscape, only with the publication of Hoe Ban Seng's *Enduring Hardship* by the Canadian Museum of Civilization are the lives of quiet desperation lived within them well documented.

In October 2000 “Enduring Hardship: Chinese Hand Laundry” opened as one of the permanent exhibits of the Canada Hall, the walkthrough of Canadian history at

the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec (available on-line at Canadian Museum of Civilization, Canada Hall, “5. Enduring Hardship – Chinese Hand Laundry”, <http://www.civilization.ca/hist/phase2/mod5e.html>, accessed April 5, 2005). The exhibit brings together the narratives of Chinese laundry workers and of their surviving family members with various artefacts taken from actual laundries. By its inclusion in the museum’s permanent collection, the exhibit symbolically affirms a place in the grand narrative of Canadian history for Chinese Canadians, emphasizing their endurance in the face of severe racism, profound poverty, and even greater social isolation.

This volume is the companion history to the exhibit written by the exhibit’s curator and the museum’s curator of Asian Studies. As such, *Enduring Hardship* provides the background to and expands on the research for the exhibit. It incorporates the findings of over 50 interviews conducted between 1976 and 2001 with laundry workers and their descendants, as well as materials drawn from sources as diverse as newspapers and cemetery records. The result is an account that pulls few punches. It graphically attests to the racism, social isolation, and unending toil experienced by the mainly male laundry workers.

Particularly moving are the laundry workers’ own accounts. Their days were a constant cycle of unending toil and mind-numbing drudgery. Work would start early in the morning, usually with boiling water to do the washing, followed by drying the laundry. In winter, drying involved hanging laundry in an overheated room inseparable from the cramped quarters in which the laundry workers often ate and slept as well as worked. Drying was followed by ironing and packaging. Days began at 5:30 or 6:00 a.m. and would not end before 10:00 p.m. Some workers reported regularly getting little more than two to four hours of sleep a night. Their standard of living was so low that they usually had to live in the laundry since they could not afford other accommodations. Hoe documents the toll exacted by these conditions. Spending all day and night in the constantly damp, crowded, and poorly ventilated laundry, compounded by overwork and sub-standard nutrition, many died young. He illustrates this with the records of 50 Chinese laundry workers buried in Ottawa’s Beechwood Cemetery between 1907 and 1947, a finding made all the more remarkable given the tiny size of the Ottawa Chinese community.

There were no economies of scale in the laundries. Revenues were directly proportional to the number of hands that could be mobilized. Most laundries had at most two or three workers (including the owners), invariably men who were often members of the same extended family. The more workers, the more laundry that could be handled and the higher the total revenue, but this then had to be divided among more people. Most of these workers had families in China, which under the *Chinese Immigration Act* of 1923 were not allowed to come to Canada. Even after the repeal of this act in 1947, sponsorship requirements decreed that laundry workers could only bring family members over one at a time, often needing decades to reunite the entire family. Among other things this meant that Chinese workers in Canada endured tremendous isolation, in many cases only seeing their family members two or three times in half a century.

Laundry workers were even more isolated from the rest of Canadian society.

Enduring Hardship demonstrates how racism was integral to the day-to-day experience of laundry workers. Hoe notes how racist measures in British Columbia forced the Chinese to spread across Canada and how laundries or restaurants were often their only possible sources of employment. He contrasts their desperate living conditions with the fantastic speculations of a white supremacist press that warned of the huge sums they were allegedly sending out of the country or that called on local governments to prevent the laundries from competing with white-owned, commercial steam laundries. As a result, the laundries were subject to a web of regulations and inspectors to prevent them from operating after hours or on Sundays. Hoe points out that, with little or no English, often themselves illiterate, and in the face of the constant work, the laundry workers had almost no means of integrating into the larger society. He even records the racist rhymes and taunts that laundry workers endured. Finally, Hoe notes that, despite all of this, some succeeded in reuniting their families or starting new ones in Canada and even succeeded in financing the university education of multiple children.

This volume is not really an analytic history, but is intended as a popular account of the kind that might appeal to the museum's visitors. While it marvellously preserves the voices of the laundry workers themselves and unflinchingly describes the racism that was integral to their lives, it does not exhaust the subject. There is no extended discussion of the diasporic family relations at work within the laundries. We learn little of families' lives in China. Nor does Hoe discuss the political life of the workers. While he does mention Chinese associations, he does not discuss their importance for mutual aid and support or their links to Chinese political movements. This contrasts with Renqiu Yu's brilliant study, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), a work that Hoe cites in the bibliography but does not draw upon in his narrative. I do not know whether the absence of this theme reflects the findings of Hoe's interviews (a thinly dispersed population may not have had the same opportunities as those in the larger centres) or whether it reflects a view that such a discussion would not be appropriate for the museum's intended audience. Neither does Hoe discuss the religious life of the laundry workers. The number and proportion of Chinese who were Christian increased the further the Chinese population got from British Columbia. This may be an artefact of the need to have some ties to the local population in order to survive. Certainly having local co-religionists would have been helpful in finding the customers that made a laundry viable in the first place. These, however, are quibbles that a larger scholarly history could address. More importantly, Chinese laundry workers were isolated from the people around them, cut off by barriers of language, of racism, and of economic necessity; *Enduring Hardship* ensures that they are not cut off from our historical memory.

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