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# Erased, Displaced, Misplaced: Reclaiming [Chinese Canadian] National Identity through Co-op Radio

Rachel Wong

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sheridan College, Oakville, ON L6H 2L1, Canada;  
rachel.wong@sheridancollege.ca

**Abstract:** This paper explores some of the conversations currently taking place within Asian Canadian studies as they relate to coalitional spaces and community building. Specifically, I look at a co-op radio program from Vancouver called *Pender Guy* which aired in the 1970s. The members of *Pender Guy* were comprised of artists and activists from the Asian Canadian community attempting to establish and solidify their own collective identity during a time when minority communities and people of color were often sidelined or else considered as “surplus” to a national narrative that privileged Anglo- and Franco-Canadian identities.

**Keywords:** Chinese Canadian community; co-op radio; Vancouver; coalition; activism; multiculturalism

During the 1970s, Canadian multiculturalism policies significantly impacted the Chinese Canadian community, shaping their social, cultural, and political experiences. Historically, Chinese immigrants to Canada had faced systemic discrimination, including the imposition of a head tax from 1885 to 1923 and the 1923 Chinese Immigration Act (1923–1947). After the repeal of the exclusionary immigration act in 1947, Chinese Canadians gradually gained more rights and recognition, though discrimination and social barriers persisted. The introduction of official multiculturalism policy by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1971 was a landmark moment, aiming to recognize and celebrate Canada’s diverse cultural fabric, including the contributions of the Chinese Canadian community. The Immigration Act of 1976, emphasizing a non-discriminatory approach and prioritizing family reunification and skills over country of origin, led to increased Chinese immigration, enhancing the community’s demographic presence and cultural influence in Canada. The era also saw increased political engagement among Chinese Canadians, who began to organize and advocate for their rights more effectively, addressing issues like discrimination and seeking greater representation in political and civic life. Organizations such as the Chinese Canadian National Council, established in 1980, played crucial roles in advocating for civil rights and social justice. Youth from the Chinese Canadian community were encouraged to engage with both their heritage and their Canadian identity, fostering a dual sense of belonging. Despite progressive policies, Chinese Canadians continued to face racism and social barriers, and balancing cultural preservation with integration into broader Canadian society remained complex. While official multiculturalism policies attempted to empower the Chinese Canadian community, facilitating cultural preservation, increased political and social participation, and fostering a more inclusive Canadian society, ongoing efforts were required to address racism and ensure genuine equality and integration.

This paper explores some of the conversations currently taking place within Asian Canadian studies as they relate to coalitional spaces and community building. Specifically, I look at a co-op radio program from Vancouver called *Pender Guy* which aired in the 1970s. The members of *Pender Guy* were comprised of artists and activists from the Asian Canadian community attempting to establish and solidify their own collective identity during a time when minority communities and people of color were often sidelined or



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else considered as “surplus” to a national narrative that privileged Anglo- and Franco-Canadian identities. This paper briefly excavates a social history of the Asian Canadian community, its artists, and activists by turning briefly to the past to look to the horizons of Asian Canadian coalitional spaces and community building. It then addresses the present moment of Asian Canadian artistic output and situates it within our present CanLit moment and addresses the space it currently occupies. The current moment in Canadian literature (CanLit) provides a backdrop for understanding the cultural contributions of Asian Canadian artists and activists. This reading of *Pender Guy* and its collective output is by no means comprehensive or even complete. Rather, this paper offers one possible reading or excavation of a social history that explores the significance of coalitional and community-based activities.

Before I begin my analysis, I want to contextualize and frame the social and historical scope from which this paper and its claims emerge. A comprehensive historical overview of the Chinese in Canada is outside the scope of this paper and has been studied and written about extensively over the past thirty years. For a comprehensive historical overview of the Chinese in Canada, see works by [Wickberg et al. \(1982\)](#), [P. S. Li \(1998\)](#), and [Yu \(2002\)](#), which provide essential context for the analysis presented here. That said, I will outline and contextualize the main historical events and movements to which *Pender Guy* was often responding in its broadcasts. As a settler colony, Canada has a long history between indigenous peoples and their relationships with white settlers of European descent, as well as racialized laborers who arrived in the country either voluntarily or through coerced means. Angie Wong characterizes this movement via traditional colonial frameworks by asserting that “discussions of settler colonialism must be read through a triadic formation, not a dichotomy of colonized and colonizer, which is what distinguishes this field from classical colonialism and postcolonial situations” ([Wong 2023](#), p. 13). Here, Wong is invoking [Iyko Day’s \(2016\)](#) triangulation of Asian settlers vis-à-vis European colonialists and indigenous peoples from her groundbreaking manuscript *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capital*. The Chinese Canadian community, then, has disrupted the traditional dichotomy of the colonized and colonizer as they occupy a third hybrid category in an in-between space of the colonized and colonizer. Wong provides the term “arrivants” to refer to people who fall in this hybridized space, “The first arrivals are referred to in scholarship as arrivants. Racialized arrivants typically perform foundational modes of labour and carry out national projects that establish settler colonies and economies” ([Wong 2023](#), p. 17). Indeed, the term “arrivants” has long been used to conceptualize non-white settlers as in [Jodi Byrd’s \(2011\)](#) manuscript *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critique of Colonialism*, “arrivants—a term I borrow from African Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite to signify those people forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe—have functioned within and have resisted the historical project of the colonization of the ‘New World’” (xix). This was true for the early Chinese arrivants, as they initially provided the majority of the labor for the Pacific Railway project in British Columbia throughout the late nineteenth century. Upon completion of the Railway, arrivants who remained in Canada traditionally held roles or owned businesses in the service industry, including laundromats, restaurants, general stores, and acting as domestic workers. As such, the arrivant “or racialized labourer is a critical placeholder within the settler colonial triad who works to reveal processes of racialization and colonization by mapping out a third space *between* settlers and Indigenous peoples” ([Wong 2023](#), p. 17). The work of the *Pender Guy* broadcast sought to reveal this history to its audience and push back against traditional nationalist (anglophone) agendas. The work of *Pender Guy* and its membership then not only pushed back an essentializing framework that ignored important aspects of settler colonial histories and legacies, it also “dismantled inventories of Orientalism and fundamental cultural assumptions that relegated Asian Canadian history, contributions, and injustices to the periphery” ([Wong 2023](#), p. 20).

*Pender Guy* aired on Vancouver Co-operative Radio from 1976 to 1981, and explored “issues related to Chinese Canadian identity, history, politics, and art through interviews, report[ing], humour, drama, and music. The program was produced entirely by volunteers, and offered a way for young Chinese-Canadians to gain community media skills and counter mainstream media representation of Chinatown and Chinese-Canadians” (Waller 2020). *Pender Guy* is one of many examples of youth activism and grassroots movements that were emerging and taking place throughout the 1970s and onward. Over the course of its broadcast, *Pender Guy* became the de facto voice of the Chinese Canadian community in the greater Vancouver area, establishing an identity for a growing number of Canadian-born Chinese who were outgrowing the assimilationist tendencies and aspirations of previous generations. As Xiaoping Li notes in *Voices Rising: Asian Canadian Cultural Activism*, “The *Pender Guy* collective committed itself to exploring the Chinese Canadian community and developing Chinese Canadian culture as a subcategory of a larger Asia Canadian identity. In so doing, young activists rejected both the traditional identification with China among early immigrants and the assimilationist attitude that was typical of the 1950s” (X. Li 2007, p. 27). There was a need, then, to unite a growing number of Canadian-born Chinese youth who occupied an in-between space of cultural identity—not fully accepted as Canadian by the national narrative, yet also not accepted as Chinese in the way previous generations had been. This cultural hybridity is not unique to the Chinese community in Canada. As others have noted, “Chinese diasporic subjects have been shaped by and have confronted very different forces on the ground in the nations of settlement in relation to wider global shifts. Chineseness has therefore become differently re-embedded in the process of diasporic relocation” (Kuehn et al. 2013, p. 7). The *Pender Guy* broadcast, though, provided a growing community with a collective identity by utilizing a coalitional space and collaborating with local community members.

*Pender Guy* attempted to bridge the Chinese Canadian community through unity in its broadcast as a coalitional space. Through interviews, reporting, songs, and skits, the *Pender Guy* broadcast turned to future generations of a community by first turning to the past to teach them about a collective history they were inherently part of. The use of varied media formats allowed the program to engage its audience on multiple levels, making the history and cultural narratives accessible and engaging. Artistic expression, community building, and coalitional space were inherent to the process of the *Pender Guy* broadcast. By incorporating elements of storytelling, music, and performance, the collective was able to create a vibrant cultural tapestry that resonated deeply with its listeners. This approach not only provided a much-needed reworking of long-accepted, but inaccurate, historical narratives about the Chinese Canadian community, but it also made these counterhegemonic narratives accessible to a growing younger adult audience.

The *Pender Guy* collective’s efforts in community building were foundational to their broadcast. They created a space where members of the Chinese Canadian community could come together, share their experiences, and build a sense of solidarity during each broadcast. This sense of community was crucial in countering the isolation and marginalization that many Chinese Canadians faced at the time. The broadcast provided a platform for voices that were often silenced or ignored, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support. Two such instances of *Pender Guy*’s community building—the “Chinese Canadiana” segment and the collective’s response to a *W5* segment which aired in September 1979—are explored in much more depth below.

Further, the concept of coalitional space was central to the *Pender Guy* broadcast. The collective understood the importance of forming alliances with other marginalized groups to address broader issues of discrimination and inequality. By highlighting the interconnectedness of different struggles within its own community that transcended issues like age, gender, and class, the *Pender Guy* broadcast promoted a more inclusive and united front against oppression. This coalitional approach not only strengthened the Chinese Canadian community from within, but also contributed to a broader movement for social justice.

As such, the *Pender Guy* collective were indeed thinking through issues of diversity, inclusion, and how to read and (re)read settler colonial histories as well as censorship before many of these terms were conceptualized the way they are presently. They were ahead of their time in recognizing the importance of these concepts and integrating them into their work. By challenging dominant narratives and offering alternative perspectives, the *Pender Guy* broadcast laid the groundwork for contemporary discussions about diversity and inclusion. As Angie Wong notes, there was an innate awareness of the Asian Canadian community's positionality and subjectivity by many of the people involved in overlapping initiatives such as the *Pender Guy* broadcast and the *Asianadian* magazine, which was published from 1978 to 1985, "With an innate awareness of and weariness towards power and hierarchical structures related to European empire building, the collective demonstrated a fluid understanding of imperialism without directly naming or referring to theories of colonialism, postcolonialism, or settler colonialism" (Wong 2023, p. 12). This paper argues for the ways in which *Pender Guy* utilized a coalitional space to foster initiatives and activities that actively resisted censorship from mainstream media, and attempted to rewrite hegemonic, settler colonial historical narratives from within a settler state. By creating a platform that highlighted the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, *Pender Guy* challenged the dominant media landscape, which often silenced or misrepresented these groups. The collective's use of radio as a medium was particularly strategic, as it allowed them to bypass traditional gatekeepers and reach a wide audience with their uncensored message.

One example of *Pender Guy's* resistance to mainstream media censorship was their active engagement in rewriting settler colonial historical narratives. For instance, they produced segments, like "Chinese Canadiana" that highlighted the contributions of Chinese Canadians to the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, a history that was often overlooked or minimized in mainstream historical accounts. By foregrounding these stories, *Pender Guy* challenged the erasure of Chinese Canadians from the national narrative and underscored their integral role in the country's development. *Pender Guy's* work exemplified how coalitional spaces could be used to resist dominant narratives and create alternative, more inclusive histories. By giving voice to the marginalized and building alliances across communities, they demonstrated the power of grassroots media to effect change and challenge the status quo.

*Pender Guy's* weekly broadcast typically lasted for around thirty minutes. A variety of topics were simultaneously covered with direct honesty and lighthearted humor. Below is a transcription of the beginning of the very first broadcast of *Pender Guy* from 18 July 1976, introduced by Paul Yee:

By the immigration from Hong Kong and Taiwan and by the rise of the People's Republic of China, this program will promote and document the growth of our culture—the Chinese Canadian experience within its Canadian context. It will look at the issues that affect the need and the ability of our people to maintain a common sense of community and unity. *Pender Guy* is broadcast in English; the language of the country that we call home. The country that we helped to build. (Vancouver Co-op Radio 1976)

A pioneering figure within the Chinese Canadian community and one of the hosts of *Pender Guy*, Yee's introduction, although brief, is worth unpacking. From the beginning we see that the folks at *Pender Guy* were acknowledging that Chinese Canadians were not a homogenous or monolithic group. By specifying places such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China, *Pender Guy* not only identifies early migration patterns of Chinese peoples to Canada, they also implicitly acknowledge the differences within these groups, even if they were often considered one in the same by non-Chinese audiences. Indeed, Lien Chao has long argued for the ways in which Chinese Canadians were stereotypically viewed by a white Canadian majority, "Instead of being received as individuals, they were always regarded as a racial group, either as a cheap labour force to be used or expelled, or as an alien race to be excluded from professional jobs, citizenship

rights, and immigration altogether” (p. 26). This exclusion from the mainstream not only rendered the Chinese Canadian community as “surplus” in many facets of society, but it also simultaneously pushed the community to form a collective identity, which Chao refers to as “the collective self” (p. 26). This “collective self” developed throughout the years *Pender Guy* aired and was a coalitional effort between the volunteers, collaborators, and listeners.

Next, they acknowledge that the broadcast is conducted in English. This is worth noting for several reasons. First, the very title of the program is actually a linguistic play on words. For most, the title seems like a nod to a man named Pender—Pender Guy. The word “guy”, however, is the Cantonese word for “street”. The significance here is that Pender Street is not only the location where the radio program was recorded and broadcast, but also the main thoroughfare of Vancouver’s Chinatown and in many ways represents the heart of the historic enclave. Without a working knowledge of some of the most basic Cantonese words and a basic understanding of the layout of Vancouver’s Chinatown, one is likely to miss the significance of the show’s title and its nod to one’s cultural identity. The Cantonese language and its dialectic variations (such as Hoi Ping and Toisan) were among the more popular dialects spoken by early Chinese arrivants to Canada. As such, although the program was conducted almost entirely in English, there remains a subtle nod to the historical, cultural, and linguistic ties to Pender Street and Chinatown at large. Chinatown, of course, was also a historic site that was designed and conceptualized to initially contain and segregate Chinese people from the rest of Canadian society in urban centers such as Vancouver, but also other urban cities such as Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto, and Montreal. There is also a quiet and subtle rupture in running the program in English. While true that many of the initial arrivants spoke linguistic variations from the Canton region, two to three generations had often passed between these arrivants and their Canadian-born children and grandchildren who were either involved in or listened to *Pender Guy*. As such, English was not only a political choice, but also one of inevitability as Lien Chao notes, “Using English as the working language is, however, sometimes an inevitable choice for native-born Chinese Canadian writers, because English is the only written language they know” (Chao 1997, pp. 23–24). Even if a Chinese dialect was spoken at home, the likelihood of knowing how to read or write an extensive set of Chinese characters was less and less likely by the late 1970s. It is also worth noting that Canada had been a bilingual country with English and French as its official languages since 1969—seven years prior to *Pender Guy*’s first broadcast, yet *Pender Guy* only acknowledges broadcasting in English. While *Pender Guy*’s distinct choice of language merits further study, it is unfortunately out of the scope of this paper and its central arguments.

The introduction also mentions that the program is meant to “promote and document the growth of our culture—the Chinese Canadian experience within its Canadian context” (Vancouver Co-op Radio 1976). The very concept of the broadcast actually does just that. This also speaks to the sense of community and unity that the volunteers were trying to foster through such a broadcast. By speaking about events and circumstances that directly affected members of the Chinese Canadian community at the time, *Pender Guy* was offering a unique take on the experiences of a group that had up until then been relatively ignored by mainstream media. The reports, interviews, skits, songs, and other performances that took place during the broadcasts united a generation of people that may have otherwise not found much else in common, while it simultaneously offered a unifying identity to which a growing group of Chinese Canadians could belong. While uniting a generation of young adults, *Pender Guy* also pushed back against racist and stereotypical portrayals of Chinese Canadians in the mainstream media of the time. As Lien Chao notes, “The community grows more aware of its rights in society and of the need to challenge racial stereotypes. Adopting English as the language of writing then becomes a political task. . . In choosing English as their working language contemporary Chinese Canadian writers. . . acknowledge the need to communicate with the rest of society” (Chao 1997, p. 23). The writers and producers of *Pender Guy* were not only writing back to historically

racist characterizations of them, they were also making a somewhat political statement by writing and broadcasting in one of the two official languages (and the one that was spoken most in British Columbia).

Below is one more transcribed excerpt from the first episode of *Pender Guy*. This transcript comes from the segment called “Chinese Canadiana”, which was a short history lesson intended for Chinese Canadian youth to teach them about the history of the Chinese in Canada. Each segment focused on a different historical event involving the Chinese in Canada and was meant to not only educate, but reinforce the presence the Chinese had always had in Canada but were not always acknowledged for by an Anglo-centric, nationalist narrative.

We are presenting Chinese Canadiana—a program consisting of readings, from the history of the Chinese in Canada. Before we begin, we would first like to present a perspective from which Chinese Canadians can view their history. Man cannot exist in society without history. History provides partial answers to the essential questions that people are constantly asking: Who are we? Where do we come from? What are we doing here? Without answers to these questions there can be no cohesion, no organization, and no purpose in a society. It is history that can provide a society with a sense of unity and purpose. Vital necessities for the survival of any society. For the Canadians of Chinese descent in Canada today, a sense of unity is absolutely vital, because we are a distinct and culturally unique ethnic minority trying to survive in the Canadian mosaic. Furthermore, the history of the Chinese in Canada has been totally ignored in our schools. Consequently, the generation of the present Chinese Canadians do not fully appreciate the sacrifices, the hardships, and the contributions that our forefathers had made many years earlier in Canada. The appreciation and knowledge of these experiences will help Chinese Canadians achieve a firmer grasp of our roots in Canada and to have a deeper understanding of our current role in society today. Today we will examine some examples of the anti-Chinese activities in Vancouver in 1886. ([Vancouver Co-op Radio 1976](#))

The segment goes on to share its history lesson and discuss various examples of anti-Chinese sentiments around Vancouver in 1886, and subsequent segments of “Chinese Canadiana” discussed similar cultural histories of the Chinese in Canada. While I have not transcribed the entire segment, this introduction to the history lesson is worth dwelling on a little while longer. As they mention, not only was the history of Chinese Canadians not taught in schools, but much of this history was also not inherently passed on from one generation to the other within the Chinese Canadian community. In a time where many Canadian families of Chinese descent wanted to immerse themselves and be accepted into the social fabric of society, particularly the older generations who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, letting go of cultural and linguistic heritage was often one of the consequences of so doing. As such, cultural and social history was not inherently passed on to the youth of the 1970s who would have listened to *Pender Guy*. The first Trudeau government had also been formally advocating for their multicultural policy since about 1971, further adding to a perceived necessity to assimilate to colonial Canadian standards. This, along with the government’s failure to adequately address the continued marginalization many racialized groups still experienced, meant that the Chinese Canadiana segment was needed more than ever before to both educate and demand representation from mainstream media. As Xiaoping Li asserts:

Despite the attempt in 1971 to adapt the policy of multiculturalism under the umbrella name ‘the Third Force,’ the Trudeau government did little to address the continual marginalization of racialized groups and First Nations peoples. National politics in the 1960s and 1970s was dominated by the issue of Quebec rights and the sharing of power between English and French Canada. The Asian

Canadian identity was an attempt to intervene in this political order. (X. Li 2007, pp. 27–28)

*Pender Guy's* Asian Canadiana segments, then, were a direct and explicit attempt to educate a community of Chinese Canadians who were now in need of establishing their own cultural identity while simultaneously establishing a coalitional identity that disrupted the Anglo- and Franco-centric binary that was privileged as the national narrative of being Canadian. Although Trudeau's policy of multiculturalism was meant to unite a growing number of racialized communities, it failed to adequately address matters of representation and inclusion that left these communities largely ignored or rendered surplus.

Coupled with anti-Asian sentiments in the news and media at the time—such as the infamous W5 segment titled “Campus Giveaway” which was about so-called Chinese students taking over Canadian universities—many Chinese Canadians were faced with overtly biased and anti-Asian sentiments on a daily basis, making it difficult to fully embrace a Chinese Canadian identity. It was later discovered that the majority of the “Chinese” students interviewed for the Campus Giveaway segment were indeed Canadian-born, domestic students, and not international students stealing admission spots from domestic students. If Chinese Canadians were represented in mainstream media, they were either misrepresented as “other”, as with the W5 segment, or incorrectly and stereotypically characterized as “surplus”. In other words, “The continuous racist discourses in the mass media exposed the limited impact of the multiculturalism policy adopted by the federal government in 1971. In the 1980s, in both private and public media cultural discourses, Asian Canadian voices remained largely missing” (X. Li 2007, p. 79). The “Chinese Canadiana” segment was an attempt to intervene and mediate this rupture and provide a coalitional space for emerging artists and activists to learn a hidden history about themselves and their place within the nation. The segment, then, pushed back, albeit gently, against traditional historical narratives of the nation state that tended to erase and ignore the presence and contributions of Chinese Canadians.

*Pender Guy* attempted to bridge the Chinese Canadian community through unity in its broadcast as a coalitional space. As Xiaoping Li notes, “Consciously positioning itself as a community program, *Pender Guy* collective rejected the mainstream idea of journalistic objectivity, unapologetically claiming to follow the principle of “Third World Journalism” (p. 45). It was through interviews, reporting, songs, and skits that the *Pender Guy* program turned to future generations of a community by turning to the past to teach them about a collective history they were inherently part of. Artistic expression, community building, and coalitional space were thus inherent to the process of the *Pender Guy* broadcast.

The work of *Pender Guy* represents a pivotal chapter in the history of Chinese Canadian community activism and cultural expression. Through its innovative use of co-op radio, *Pender Guy* provided a vital platform for articulating a distinct Chinese Canadian identity during a period of significant social and political change. The program's ability to blend humor, drama, interviews, and music created a multifaceted space for dialogue and representation, addressing both intra-community issues and broader societal concerns. By challenging stereotypes and resisting the pressures of assimilation, *Pender Guy* fostered a sense of unity and pride within the Chinese Canadian community. Its legacy demonstrates the importance of media in shaping and reclaiming marginalized identities, and its impact continues to resonate in contemporary discussions about multiculturalism, diaspora, and community solidarity. As we reflect on the contributions of *Pender Guy*, we are reminded of the enduring power of grassroots media to inspire change and affirm cultural identity.

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