

To Go for Broke: The Spirit of the 70s

In 1969, there was no such thing as Asian Canadian writing, at least not as a genre. In fact, there was no such thing as an Asian Canadian. Japanese Canadians were the Japanese; Chinese Canadians were the Chinese. The generic term was “Oriental.”

True, *The New Canadian*, a Japanese Canadian community newspaper, had been publishing since 1939. Joy Kogawa had written for it, as had Ken Adachi (he acted as editor at one time), Frank Moritsugu, Toyo Takata (another editor), Muriel Kitagawa, Irene Uchida, and Midge Ayukawa. Although they rose to prominence in their respective careers, they were not considered part of any literary movement.

I had never heard of any of these people. I was nineteen, living in Toronto’s east end, about to enter university, and playing music on my guitar. These writers were from another era, another reality—the reality of pre-war Vancouver, the internment camps and post-war exile.

The war meant Vietnam to me. WWII meant John Wayne, television documentaries and the toy soldiers of my childhood. I didn’t know a thing about the camps, the injustices, the hardships, even of my own family. My parents weren’t talking about that time, and there weren’t any books on the subject, including the history books my teachers assigned. Shizue Takashima’s *A Child in Prison Camp* was to come out in 1971; Adachi’s *The Enemy That Never Was* in 1976; and Kogawa’s *Obasan* in 1981.

So, in 1970 when I hung up my rock & roll shoes to concentrate on writing songs, the only role models I had were the mainstream musicians infused

with the militant, activist sentiments of the times. While I was in *The Asia Minors*, an all Chinese and Japanese Canadian top-forties band, I managed to get us booked to do a concert at something called the “Hiroshima Day: Anti-War Festival and Rally.” The event was to be held at Nathan Phillips Square on August 8, 1969, and was organized by the Vietnamese Mobilization Committee. It seemed like an ideal way to become involved in the Anti-War Movement. Unfortunately the matriarch of the majority of the band members, a prominent restaurateur and Chinese-community doyenne, didn’t like the idea of her children participating in a “festival and rally” that promoted the Communist cause in Vietnam (or so she believed). By pulling various strings down at City Hall, she nearly shut down the entire event, and when she found she couldn’t cancel the organization’s permit to stage the rally, she simply forbade her children from appearing—which left me to do a solo act during a brilliantly sunny day filled with the spirit of protest and revolution.

Playing Country Joe MacDonald’s “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag” for hundreds of people, I felt like I was at Woodstock, drawing great strength from the moment. By the following year, *The Asia Minors* had broken up and I turned to song writing.

The first rule of song writing and indeed writing itself is to write about that which you know. So what did I know? I turned to my mother and asked her how she had met my father, a question that had never come up before. She seemed surprised at my question and dismissed me immediately, calling me *aho* (stupid). That was something I didn’t need to hear, she told me. Undaunted, I kept at her and eventually she relented. As she drew in breath, her eyes turned sad recalling all that went before. What emerged was an astounding tale.

At the age of sixteen she was approached by her father with a proposal to marry a man she had never seen and who was living in Canada, a land she did not know. She had no choice but to say yes. No one dared to defy the head of the family in those days. With her approval, my father then came to Japan and the two became husband and wife. Two weeks later, he headed back to Canada to avoid the Japanese army draft. Mother stayed another two years because of the restrictive Canadian immigration laws, which suited her fine. She certainly didn’t want to leave Japan.

Eventually she did leave with her family’s good wishes, her clothes, and not much else. On the Vancouver docks, she saw the horrible “white devils”

for the first time. Fortunately she was met by a Japanese stranger who claimed to be my father's cousin, whose task was to escort her to a logging camp up the coast. My mother had no choice but to believe him—an incredibly brave act in retrospect, since many women were kidnapped and forced into prostitution.

As fate would have it, the cousin was telling the truth and he did take her to a floating lumber camp near Alert Bay on Vancouver Island. There she reunited with her husband under rather primitive conditions. The only edifice on the raft was a chicken shack! My mother spent days cleaning it. I can still hear her describing it as "Never clean. Never clean."

My mother also told me about the internment camps, places like Sandon, Slocan and New Denver where she, my father and brother and all the family friends were incarcerated because of their birth. The rage of my youth burned in me as I listened and learned.

Alone in my room that evening, I stumbled through several chord progressions and struggled to write the words that eventually became "New Denver," my first song.

The government took all my property,
 But I'll survive somehow.
 And all I can offer you is a lifetime of hardships, my love.
 Maybe love's not worth much in these troubled times,
 But it's the only thing I can offer you on the outside in the snow.
 New Denver is washed away with the rain.
 New Denver will never know, never know
 The pain it caused.

The lyrics appeared for the first time in the Christmas edition of *The New Canadian* in 1970. Soon thereafter I received a phone call from Alan Hotta, the English-language editor at *The New Canadian*. He spoke to me about how much he admired the lyrics and how he was organizing a few meetings of *sansei* (third-generation Japanese Canadians) to "rap" about what it meant to be Japanese Canadian. I must admit, I didn't see the relevance at first. After all, I was a working-class kid on my way to the middle via a university education, but then I realized, in hearing my mother's story, I was learning my own. Perhaps there were others doing the same.

The gathering was at the Toronto Buddhist Church where I met Alan, himself a *sansei* with a square face, long, straggly hair, and keen, intelligent eyes. After graduating from the University of Toronto, he had traveled to the west coast in the late '60s to explore what "Asian Americans" were doing in

the Anti-War Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Asian American Movement. At the University of California at Berkeley, he met the flamboyant Ron Tanaka, a third-generation Japanese American who was completing his studies in Milton and was on his way to teach at the University of British Columbia.

It was at UBC that the two committed themselves to the idea of creating an Asian Canadian community, arts, and culture through consciousness raising. Inviting the Chinese and Japanese Canadian students in his class and on campus, Tanaka formed a photography workshop to record images of the community in Chinatown and the old Japantown areas of Vancouver and Steveston. Members at the time were Sean Gunn, Mayu Takasaki, Garrick Chu, Joyce Chong, Naomi Shikaze, Glen Nagano, Connie Kadota and others.

The group organized, in the spring of 1972, the Asian Canadian Experience exhibit in UBC's Student Union Building, a display which included photographs of the present-day community as well as photographs found in the UBC Special Collections Archives and public libraries. The public saw for the first time pictures of the internment and the Chinese Canadian railroad workers.

On a snowy winter day in 1971, Alan Hotta had gathered at the Toronto Buddhist Church a number of Japanese Canadian musicians—a breed of *sansei* I had never encountered before. The names that stand out in my mind of that time are Frank Nakashima and Martin Kobayakawa who later participated in my first album *Runaway Horses*.

Alan introduced us to the Asian American folk group *Chris and Joanne* (Chris Iijima and Joanne Miyamoto). These two *sansei* along with Chinese American musician and songwriter “Charlie” Chin had been singing their songs about the Asian American experience around the country. Although the lyrics displayed a Marxist bent, they spoke to me.

We are the children of the migrant worker.
We are the offspring of the concentration camp.
Sons and daughters of the railroad builder
Who leave their stamp on Amerika [sic].

We are the children of the Chinese waiter,
Born and raised in the laundry room.
We are the offspring of the Japanese gardner [sic]
Who leave their stamp on Amerika.

I left the church bolstered by the knowledge that writing about my Asian experiences, outlook and feelings was as valid as the work of the well-known singer/songwriters of the time—Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell and a host of others.

I attended several of the ensuing “rap sessions” in Alan’s north-end basement apartment amazed by the number and variety of *sansei* and Canadian-born Chinese who attended. Discussions on racism, subtle and overt, arose. Community politics. The idea of art, its purposes and forms. Identity issues came to the surface, especially when dealing with perceptions of beauty. Ron Tanaka’s poem “I hate my wife for her flat yellow face” was the central focus of the discussion.

I hate my wife for her flat yellow face
and her fat cucumber legs, but mostly
for her lack of elegance and lack of
intelligence compared to Judith Gluck.

It was late at night, my head swirling with the effects of too much beer. I remember staring at a poster on the wall with a drawing of an Asian woman’s face marked up to indicate where a cosmetic surgeon was to cut and alter (the same image was used later in a poster promulgating the Chinese Canadian Youth Conference of 1975) to make the countenance more “Western” and thinking how ugly the poetic imagery was, how obvious the self-loathing and how denigrating the portrait of Asian women contained in the lines. But I was too young and filled with the militant fervour of the times to believe the poem was anything but profound and insightful. Others of that period agree. Mayu Takasaki reminded me that “we were all fresh out of university,” in awe of Tanaka’s intellect, erudition and presence. Sean Gunn felt the poet was expressing his “hypocrisy” in extolling western values of beauty while belittling his own kind. Such was the belief in the good intentions of a larger-than-life mentor.

About that time, the still unnamed Toronto group split over dialectic differences. The *sansei* who settled into the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre sought *nisei* (second generation) approval and support. Alan’s group continued to meet in his apartment to carry on the discussions and to produce the first Canadian-*sansei* publication. The *Powell Street Review*, conceived and published by Alan Hotta, featured many neophyte Japanese Canadian

writers exploring their identities, probably for the first time in their lives.

The Powell Street Review is new. It is a Toronto-based publication originated by third generation Japanese Canadians and designed for the entire Japanese community. It intends to deal with and pose questions about the character of our community by publishing the viewpoints of its members. It intends to present material from the community that might also give some insight into the Asian Canadian community as a whole as well as into other third world communities. In this way, we might better begin to understand the Japanese community and its relation to other Asian communities and minority groups in general. ("A Reaffirmation")

The newspaper was well ahead of its time—but only one issue was ever produced. The *nisei* seeing it as "radical" and "*aka*" (red) refused to support it. The suburban-bred *sansei* followed their parents' lead. Perhaps they were all frightened by what they read. The issue, for example, featured quite a frank article that echoed the Tanaka poem "I hate my wife for her flat yellow face."

My parents have tried to encourage me to marry an Oriental, but they also wanted me to marry a man of my own choosing. I have met many Oriental men and they seem to lack many qualities that I would need in any man I would marry. ("White Male")

Again, the self-loathing was evident to all who read it. Those of us who understood its implications considered the attitudes expressed as symptomatic of a racist society.

Ron Tanaka as well contributed what became the seminal paper on Asian Canadian art and artists for the issue.

The Japanese-Canadian writer is an interesting creature. His most notable characteristic is his extreme rarity. In this paper, I would like to share with you some reflections on why there are so few Japanese Canadians interested in writing (or any of the arts for that matter) and then go on to suggest a kind of program for developing a new breed of *sansei* writers. In the first sections, I will refer to Asian Canadians in general because I feel that there are certain generalizations that hold for Chinese (and other minorities) as well as Japanese. In later sections, however, I want to deal specifically with the *sansei* because I know them (us) best. ("Sansei Artist")

The Cultural Centre *sansei* published *Tōra*, a journal which delved into Japanese Canadian identity and community issues. Despite the good intentions of the writers, the journal featured a classified section entitled the "Yerrow Pages." The *Tōra* members (as they were known) did go on to become prominent figures in the community. Van Hori in particular was essential to the redress movement in Toronto of the 1980s.

Perhaps the culmination of all this activity was the 1972 Asian Canadian Experience Conference. It was the first gathering of second-, third- and even some fourth-generation Japanese and Chinese Canadians from Toronto (*Powell Street Review* members) and Vancouver (primarily the Wakayama Group out of UBC so named by Ron Tanaka because he identified with the Japanese Canadians in the fishing village of Steveston who were originally from the Japanese province of Wakayama. The Chinese Canadians dubbed themselves Ga Hing (or “Brotherhood”). Alan Hotta, co-ordinator, defined the issues as follows:

Individuals find themselves caught in a cultural whirlpool, desperately seeking a stable common denominator to help them define, establish and develop their own life goals. Specifically, the cultural vacuum has had its effect upon the Chinese Canadian and Japanese Canadian communities. In spite of various manifestations of community life (picnics, camps, festivals etc.), there has been an unfortunate lack of purposes in life and alienation; particularly among the youth of the communities ... Of paramount concern ... is the general lack of awareness of the contributions the Chinese and Japanese Canadian communities have made for Canada. (“Conference mandate”)

The conference was held primarily at “The House,” a three-storey semi-detached house on Mutual Street near today’s Ryerson Polytechnic University in downtown Toronto. Alan and several others had rented the place as their home.

During the week of discussions and performances, many Asian Canadians dropped by to participate, “to check out what was happening.” They came to see the photo exhibit developed by the Vancouver Wakayama Group as their part of the first Asian Canadian Experience display presented earlier that year. They also came to listen to symposia conducted by delegates on topics relevant to the two communities and to attend the two “Arts Nights” dedicated to readings by poets and performances by songwriters.

The House itself was filled with music. Alan had brought out his bootlegged tape of *Chris and Joanne* with “Charlie” Chin in concert in New York. Sean Gunn, Martin Kobayakawa and I jammed in the attic. Shannon Gunn and Joyce Chong (prominent musicians in their own right today) sang in sweet harmony just about anywhere. Gerry Shikatani and David Fujino (members of the *Tora* group) dropped by to read their poetry—abstract and sound poetry, the first I had encountered. Garrick Chu sat with Alan Kondo (the future editor of the first Asian American feature film *Hito Hata*) talking about film and media in general as a means of bringing about community.

I myself was excited at the prospect of meeting and hearing Ron Tanaka who breezed in for an afternoon to “rap” in the house’s living room. He sat with his confidence brimming over and his eyes glowing with an intensity I had never before encountered, elaborating on his theories about Asian-Canadian art and artists contained in his *Powell Street Review* article. Tanaka with his erudition and arrogance presented such an imposing figure I could see why his influence had seeped into all of us. Unfortunately, he left quickly like mist in the morning sun.

In the kitchen, Mrs. Kobayakawa had left a bowl of tuna casserole which never seemed to empty. There were the drunken late nights at the fabled Le Coq D’Or Tavern (a temple of African-American rhythm and blues in 1970s Toronto) nearby. Conversations and arguments with Mayu Takasaki, Lucy Komori and Diane Kadota. Naomi Shikaze’s picture, her long black hair framing her flawless face with sharp, contemplative eyes, hung on the wall next to the photographs of the internment, a juxtaposition not lost on all who viewed the display.

It was also the first time I had heard of Malcolm X, the Black Panthers and the 442, the all-*nisei* battalion during World War II whose acts of heroism were summed up in their battle cry, “Go for broke!” These men had suffered casualties and injuries at an alarming rate to prove themselves to be Americans and to get their families free from the internment camps. There grew a sense in all of us that we too had to “go for broke” if we were going to make any kind of impact on Canadian society.

Well don’t you know
We got to go for broke
Every single day of our lives.

You know we can’t provoke
We got to be good folk for white eyes.
We got to go for broke!
(Watada, “Go For Broke”)

During the two Arts Nights, held at the University Settlement House near the Art Gallery of Ontario, I introduced “New Denver” and another song “Slocan (I’m Coming Back to You)” to an audience which I felt understood what I was saying for the first time. Many poets read their poems about being Asian Canadian. One in particular, Martin Kobayakawa’s musical version of Charlotte Chiba’s poem of alienation “The Floor of My Room is Cold,” was quite poignant.

The floor of my room is cold
I have nowhere to call home
I have no one to call for me
and give me a cup of hot comfort

Where did I go
when the party began
when the people met
and made love
Where was I
when work was finished for the day
Did I miss you too
The bed in my room
will not be slept in
The light shall not be shut off
The moon can no more be alone
with me
I'm going to paint it yellow
and let the days of sunshine
last forever
and let the floor become warm
with my pacing

Sean Gunn as well introduced his satirical poetry to a surprised but delighted audience.

by any means
bleach out your jeans
and when they fade
you've got it made

and you wonder where the yellow went
when you brush yourself with a permanent
brighter than bright
whiter than white
ninety nine forty four one hundred percent
and you wondered, where the yellow went?

The performances and the conference itself ended with a tearful rendition of "Leaving on a Jet Plane" by Shannon and Joyce. All the musicians joined in and then the audience. No one knew what the future was to hold but all held hope in their hearts.

Shortly after the conference, Bing Thom, fresh from his own Berkeley experience, appeared in Vancouver espousing a Maoist approach to community activism. He dismissed Tanaka's strategy of reclaiming history as

inadequate, too passive. "Either you record history or you are part of it," he claimed. "Get your hands dirty!"

Under Thom's influence and in the fallout of the Toronto conference, Garrick Chu and Sean Gunn began to take an active role in the Asian and Chinese Canadian communities. They organized to protest the construction of a firehall in the Chinatown area; they got involved in building the Chinese Cultural Centre; they campaigned for the NDP (where they met Tamio Wakayama and Takeo Yamashiro. Tamio's photographs are celebrated as an essential record of the Civil Rights Movement in 1960's Mississippi and Georgia. Takeo is a recognized master of the *shakuhachi*, bamboo flute); and they formed the Chinese Canadian Writers Workshop. The workshop, which included Paul Yee and Sky Lee, began by producing *Gum San Po*, the first English-language Chinese Canadian newspaper. Jim Wong-Chu, a budding photographer, joined the staff at that time.

The workshop was the precursor to the present-day Asian Canadian Writers Workshop which was first anchored by Sean Gunn, Jim Wong Chu, Raymond Dang (who later wrote the controversial play *Powder Blue Chevy*) and Terry Jang Barclay and later attracted such celebrated writers as Wayson Choy, Denise Chong, and Lien Chao.

1977, the Japanese Canadian Centennial Year, saw even more activity. Alan Hotta organized the Centennial Conference in Toronto as a long overdue follow-up to the 1972 conference. The Wakayama group had become by 1977 members of the Powell Street Revue and the Japanese Canadian Centennial Project which conceived and produced an exhibition, tour and book called *A Dream of Riches* (written, edited and organized primarily by Tamio Wakayama). Representatives including Rick Shiomi (who later wrote the Off-Broadway hit play *Yellow Fever*) came to Toronto to present a slide show and narrative based on that collection's material.

Tonari Gumi, established in 1975 to help the *issei* (first generation) already resettled in the impoverished Japantown area of Vancouver, attracted by 1977 many *sansei* and *shin ijusha* (post-war immigrants) volunteers like Mayu Takasaki, and Naomi and Ken Shikaze (sister and brother). Later the same volunteers and a handful of others, including Rick Shiomi, Lucy Komori, Tamio Wakayama and Sean Gunn, started the amazing run of the Powell Street Festival, the only festival to celebrate Japanese Canadian art and culture. It gave poets and writers like Roy Kiyooka, Roy Miki, Sean Gunn, Sky

Lee, Rick Shiomi, and me a venue for reading new material. In the ensuing years, Hiromi Goto, Sally Ito, Joy Kogawa, Kerri Sakamoto, Paul Yee, and Jim Wong Chu all participated in the festival and benefited from coming in contact with the sensibilities forged back in the fire of the 1970s.

Also during 1977, the Chinese Canadian Writers Workshop met at Sean Gunn and Ken Shikaze's house to determine the organization's future. Tired of the inactivity, Ken Shikaze entreated them to do something—get a grant and put together an anthology, an Asian Canadian anthology. And so they did, along with the Powell Street Revue.

Inalienable Rice: A Chinese & Japanese Canadian Anthology appeared in 1980. Edited by Garrick Chu, Sean Gunn, Paul Yee, Ken Shikaze, Linda Uyehara Hoffman and Rick Shiomi, the first collection of Asian Canadian writing featured many writers who were later to have a significant impact on Canadian letters and politics: Audrey Kobayashi, Bennett Lee, Paul Yee, Joy Kogawa, Roy Kiyooka, Bing Thom, Sean Gunn, Roy Miki, Jim Wong Chu, and Sky Lee.

The anthology, a perfect-bound magazine of eighty-three pages with a simple black and white drawing of a bowl of rice, fork and knife and chopsticks on the front cover, was a humble first step for these writers but its importance is obvious when considering future publications like *Many Mouthed Birds* (edited by Bennett Lee and Jim Wong Chu, 1991), *Tales from Gold Mountain* (Paul Yee, 1989), and *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (Sky Lee, 1990).

I doubt that Ron Tanaka, Alan Hotta, and Bing Thom could have foreseen what was to become of their desire for an Asian Canadian culture and community, but through their efforts in the early 1970s, a spirit was born that created the possibility of an Asian Canadian writing. I am still affected by it—my own writing of poetry, music, plays and fiction thrives on it. Ultimately, I feel that all Asian Canadian writers (including South Asian, Korean, Vietnamese, Filipino and others) share a common need to “go for broke” in establishing a strong and consistent literary voice in Canada. It is highly likely that we will.

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