

# "Want to be a superior man?": The Production Chinese Canadian Masculinities in Paul Yee's Writing

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the re-imagining of Chinese Canadian masculinity in Paul Yee's novel, *A Superior Man* (2015). Unlike Yee's previous writing, this novel does not describe Chinese Canadian men as Western Frontier heroes. Rather, it illustrates how Chinese immigration intersects with the oppression of Indigenous peoples, and how notions of masculinity are produced within settler colonialism. The novel thus provides an important entry point into discussions about how to make Indigenous presence and colonization foundational to anti-racist efforts. Yet, since it represents Indigenous peoples as largely peripheral, the novel also points to how much anti-colonial work remains to be done.

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## Introduction

The year 1988, which marked the passing of the Canadian Multicultural Act, signaled a politicization for Asian Canadians, who increasingly became involved in anti-racist efforts to re-imagine Asian Canadian identity and claim national belonging. As part of this effort, some Chinese Canadian activists started to see the official symbolic history of Canada as a tool for agency, rather than an instrument that necessarily creates images of Chinese men “as small, effeminate and weak in relation to the bodies and masculinities of white men” (Millington, Vertinsky, Boyle, and Wilson 198). Although this symbolic history had been used to racialize Chinese men by exploiting their labour and segregating their communities away from whites (Pon 142), Chinese Canadian activists discovered that this same history could be manipulated to re-masculinize early Chinese immigrants and produce “heroic images” of their “contributions ...to the development of the West Coast” (Chao 53). Such a remasculinization was deemed as meaningful to combat the stereotype of the “yellow peril,” which “vilified, feminized, and pathologized” these immigrants as threatening and deviant (Pon 141). As this article demonstrates, since the late 1980s, Chinese Canadian literature has, in many ways, taken up the task of dismantling the “yellow peril” stereotype through the re-working of white settler nation-building myths. Yet, while this literature has sought to reinvent these myths, it has also tended to reinforce their most salient features, which are decidedly nationalist and masculine.

Chinese Canadian writers, like Paul Yee, who emerge shortly after 1988 have tried to incorporate the experiences of early Chinese immigrants into the mythology of the Western Frontier. This article focuses specifically on Yee’s work, suggesting that its emphasis on the activities of “manly” men tends to conform to a dominant masculinity in Western culture. In particular, by drawing on existing literary conventions, Yee presents the male body as a significant site for claiming Canadianness. As Daniel Coleman explains, the metaphor of the male body as symbolic for national values has long-standing roots in Canadian literature; it is a figure that acts as “a central representation of [acceptable] civil ideals... [including] practical education, independent initiative and self-discipline” (130). Thus, in the first half of this article, I argue that Yee engages with this symbolic history to destabilize the norm of white manliness and replace it with a re-masculinized image of the Chinese Canadian male body. Examining Yee’s *Tales from Gold Mountain: Stories of the Chinese in the New World* (1989), it shows how the stories adapt white settler nation-building myths by presenting Chinese Canadian men as reconceptualised versions of Western Frontier heroes. I stress that this adaptation constitutes a powerful, yet problematic, anti-

racist strategy. While the strategy helps to tell a history that is otherwise marginalized and degraded in the dominant mythology, it also re-enacts exclusionary processes that diminish the experiences of women and Indigenous peoples. Most concerning, it repeats the myth of *terra nullius*, which Coleman explains perpetuates the notion that “Canada was once a wilderness —wild, uncultivated, and largely empty— until [male settlers] arrived and carved out a society” (Coleman 28).

As transnational feminist and Indigenous scholars have pointed out, there is a need for Asian Canadian writers and activists to recognize Indigenous presence and integrate “an understanding of Canada as a colonialist state into their frameworks” (Lawrence and Dua 123). These discussions demonstrate that “[o]ppositionality to whiteness” —while a seemingly productive response to Canada’s institutional racism and neglect— is not a sufficient stance to “unpac[k] the specific problematics of racialized subjects who have inherited the violence of colonization” (Wong 158). Indeed, such a stance still directs energy to a dominant, colonialist and patriarchal construction of Canada; it positions “normalized whiteness as the reference point through which” to articulate marginalized identities (158). Thus, the liberal-multiculturalist structure of Canadian antiracism risks “becoming complicit in the...structures and processes of domination that it ought to oppose” by not engaging with “the injustice of colonial dispossession” (Coulthard 12). Anti-racism needs to recognize Canada’s history of genocidal policies and land-theft, as well as the contemporary situation and struggles of Indigenous peoples. The challenge for Asian Canadians is hence to create an anti-colonial perspective that explores “the dynamic interaction between people of colour, Indigeneity, and colonialism” (Lawrence and Dua 133). In other words, anti-racist efforts should employ a relational approach to “raise questions regarding immigrant complicity in the colonization of the land” (Wong 158-9). Accordingly, the second half of this article examines Yee’s latest novel, *A Superior Man* (2015), investigating how the novel breaks with white settler nation-building myths and seeks to articulate Chinese Canadian masculinity in alternative ways. It argues that the novel calls attention to the racial diversity of the Western Frontier by emphasizing notions of co-presence and interracial interaction. *A Superior Man* illustrates how the arrival of Chinese Canadians intersects with the oppression of Indigenous peoples; it also highlights how Chinese Canadian masculinity has been informed by the structures of settler colonialism. Nonetheless, while the novel complicates the symbolic history of Canada, it still largely represents Indigenous peoples as peripheral figures. Even as the novel provides an important entry point for ongoing discussions, then, it also exposes how much anti-colonial work remains to be done.

## Settler Nation-Building Myths

The official symbolic history of Canada is characterized by a set of white settler nation-building myths, which play a central role in defining Canadian identity. These myths exert an influence on dominant culture, history, and politics by portraying a desired vision of the nation. As Paulette Regan observes, the purpose of the myths is to “bolste[r] settler justifications for appropriating Indigenous lands by framing these actions as a moral... imperative” to bring “civilization” to all areas of the country (105). Frequently, these narratives ignore Indigenous presence, opting instead to represent the West as a vast and untamed wilderness. This strategic omission allows for a focus on white settlers and their efforts to build “a new home in the New World” (Coleman 29). Indeed, despite an apparent diversity of white settler nation-building myths, which feature “epitomizing moments [such as] Confederation, [W]estern settlement, [and] the building of the railway,” the narratives are structured along common lines (Regan 105); they work to perpetuate a “visionary of ‘Great White Man’ heroes” who make an imprint on the land and “fulfill their national dream” (105). The recurrent images of white men “carving, fighting, and battling” the landscape help to solidify the view that the nation was formed through a determined and violent contest with nature (Coleman 29). The underlying message is that white men have earned their right to “own” the land, as they valiantly “fought the overwhelming odds of nature...and won a cultivated, orderly society” (28). White men are thus pictured as “literary personifications for the Canadian nation,” embodying the vaunted masculine qualities of future-oriented vision, robust strength, and advanced morality that supposedly define Canada (6). This popular symbolic history is so influential that it is little wonder that Chinese Canadian writers have deemed it necessary to grapple with their place in such a mythology. For these writers, white settler nation-building myths provide a vehicle for re-writing national history, as well as re-masculinizing the Chinese Canadian male body, which has been denigrated in Canadian legislation and popular rhetoric.

Just as white settler nation-building myths have worked to define white men as “Canadian,” they have functioned to racialize Chinese men as unworthy “foreigners” and perpetual “aliens.” Although these myths enact a violent exclusion against Indigenous peoples, they deploy a limited inclusion of Chinese settlers by portraying these settlers as occasional “interlopers” who jeopardize the Canadian landscape (Stanley 52). This representational dynamic allows white settlers to be positioned as “native” —“as already occupying the territory and as being threatened by an influx of...Chinese [immigrants]” (51). In other words, the dynamic creates a symbolic history in which white men are

imagined as “already indigenous,” whereas Chinese men are figured as envious and untrustworthy “latecomers” (Coleman 16). Furthermore, the constructed opposition between “Chinese” and “Canadian” results in “a cluster of negative stereotypes” about “Chinamen,” which reify the privileged, normative status of “middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied” white men (Millington, Vertinsky, Boyle, and Wilson 198). Labelled as “the ‘Yellow Peril,’ ‘heathens,’ and ‘unassimilable celestials,’” Chinese men are typecast as lacking conventional masculine qualities (Pon 142). Historically, this bodily emasculation provided reasons to marginalize and exploit the Chinese immigrants in Canada, as well as reinforce exclusionary laws and head tax policies (Pon 142). Moreover, critics have noted that the legacy of such emasculation has been to diminish the “presence of the Chinese immigrants in pioneer projects,” and deny their “contributions” to the building of British Columbia (Chao 55). The re-masculinization of the Chinese male body has thus become a useful anti-racist method for some Chinese Canadian writers. Nonetheless, this method conforms to white settler-colonial myths of an “empty land” and “progress.” Moreover, it risks upholding Western constructions of masculinity and aggression.

## Remasculinizing the Chinese Male Body

Centred on the travails of young Chinese men who immigrate to Canada around the turn of the nineteenth century, Yee’s *Tales from Gold Mountain* is an example of a body of narratives that rework an existing collection of Canadian mythology to destabilize the “yellow peril” stereotype. With a focus on restoring the lost manhood of Chinese men, these narratives modify the heroic journey motif of white settler nation-building myths to claim a sense of Chinese Canadian belonging. The primary objective is not necessarily to debunk these myths, so much as it is to modify them and point out what is presumably “missing” —the “major role” that Chinese Canadian men have played in shaping, clearing, and cultivating the land (Chao 54). The narratives substitute “Gold Mountain heroes” for “Great White men” as embodiments of the nation. This substitution helps to upturn the perception that Chinese Canadians are perpetual “aliens.” Yee thus creates images of Chinese workers conducting an aggressive battle against nature in order to suggest that Chinese Canadians, like other land-clearing “pioneers,” are a meaningful part of Canada’s formation. These nationalist stories, which feature Chinese men confronting dangerous labour conditions, corrupt bosses, and unfair immigration restrictions, also emphasize the ingenuity and commitment of Chinese Canadians, who have historically been denied

citizenship rights. Nonetheless, their indictments of Canada's racism cannot disturb the masculinist, heteronormative white settler logics that undergird nation-building myths.

Yee's collection of short stories, *Tales from Gold Mountain*, demonstrates how a critique of Canada's racism and historical treatment of Chinese immigrants often coincides with an attempt to re-masculinize the Chinese Canadian male body. The collection follows the basic format of white settler nation-building myths—a format that Jane Tolmie and Karis Shearer identify as showcasing male protagonists who encounter several difficulties and must learn to channel “their strength into productive and profitable *physical* labour” (95, emphasis in original). The protagonists' transformation into “pioneering m[e]n of the land” symbolizes their development into “model citizens” (95). In Yee's “Spirits of the Railway,” for instance, the dual role of young Chu as dutiful son and railway worker means that he must become the provider for his family and find a place for himself in Canada. As a dutiful son, young Chu “cross[es] the Pacific” to “the New World” to support his ailing mother and search for his father, Farmer Chu, who is missing (Yee, *Tales* 11). Upon his arrival, young Chu discovers that “[t]here [a]re thousands of Chinese” along the West Coast, shaping the landscape (11). Young Chu's vision highlights the importance of Chinese male labour in creating the nation; his challenge is then to follow in the footsteps of men who came before him. Because he is “strong” and “fear[s] neither danger nor hard labour,” young Chu joins a “work gang...to build the railway” (12). The work is explicitly framed as a violent struggle against nature, as young Chu is pictured as “hack[ing] at hills with hand-scoops and shovels,” using “hammers and chisels to chi[p] boulders into gravel,” and directing “dynamite and drills [to make] tunnels deep into the mountain” (12). Chu's triumph over the “towering ranges of dark raw rock” facilitates his emergence as a nation-building hero (12). Near the end of the story, moreover, young Chu is able to stake his claim to Canadian land by creating a gravesite “on top of [a] cliff” to honour his father and other workers who died while building the railway (15). The act of making a “final resting place” for the railway workers underscores an idea that the blood, sweat, and bones of Chinese men have entered into, and become one with, the Canadian soil (14). It is a symbolic idea that helps to establish young Chu's right to “own” the land and be recognized as “Canadian.”

### Furthering the Nation through Marriage

In Yee's collection, the narrative depictions of masculine toughness move in predictable manner toward heterosexual unions, which in white settler nation-building myths symbolize not only the establishment of the traditional family, but also a presumed “*unity*

of interests” within the nation (McClintock 357, emphasis in original). As Anne McClintock explains, the “family trope is important to nationalism,” as it offers a seemingly “natural” figure for conveying a forward-looking and reproductive vision of the nation (357). Within this symbolic history, “[w]omen are represented as...embodying nationalism's conservative principle of continuity” (359), whereas men signify “nationalism's progressive, or revolutionary, principle of discontinuity” or enlightened development (359). Thus, by presenting Chinese male protagonists as desirous of heterosexual marriage, Yee not only challenges the racist stereotype of Chinese men as backward and effeminate, but also describes them in the fashion of white nation-building myths: as “progressive agent[s] of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent, and historic)” (McClintock 359). In this way, he insists that early Chinese immigrants were ideal national subjects. For example, the suitor in Yee's “Ginger for the Heart” is portrayed as a virtuous young man who is committed to Yenna, the daughter of a Chinese merchant. In order to get married, the suitor must first “repay his debts” and earn enough money to provide for Yenna (Yee, *Tales* 36). The story thus highlights the suitor's “masculine” role as breadwinner. When the suitor returns to Yenna, he is “older and wiser” (37), but he has not yet become a dynamic figure of change. As with other nation-building heroes, he needs to pair his physical strength with a future orientation, which requires him to prove his adaptability in the “new land” (38). At first, the suitor is angered by Yenna's request to stay in Chinatown and look after her father, a request that breaks with the convention that “A man does not live in his wife's house” (38). Nonetheless, the suitor learns to relinquish “the old ways” when he tosses Yenna's gift of ginger into the fire and sees that it is unscathed (38). The ginger's durability signifies the constancy of Yenna's love, as well as the couple's promising future together in Canada. The suitor subsequently chooses to embrace change and become an agent of national modernity. Countering notions of Chinese unassimilability and backwardness, the story represents early Chinese Canadian men as able to carry out the physical labour of territorial expansion, as well as the continuation of the nation through heterosexual marriage and children.

### Moral Ideals and Chinese Manliness

By stressing the manly qualities of his “Gold Mountain heroes,” Yee tacitly presents a masculinity contest, in which a difference between Chinese settlers and their white counterparts is clarified. His Chinese male protagonists prove resistant to Western-style greed and selfishness, placing communal ideals over their own individual interests.

For example, Lee Jim, the main character of Yee's "The Revenge of the Iron Chink," is described as a responsible boss of a salmon cannery; he runs the business well so that the white owner, nicknamed "Chimney Head," makes a great deal of profit (Yee, *Tales* 60). Whereas the Chinese boss is practical and conscientious, the white owner is selfishly out-of-touch. Indeed, Chimney Head is pictured as a "little man" with "fat hands" to symbolize his lack of physical fitness and tendency toward gluttony (60); his habit of wearing a "tall hat" further indicates a sense of arrogance (60). The story implicitly asks the question: who really "owns" the cannery, the Chinese man who works it or the "fat little" white man with title to the land? This question is then exacerbated when Chimney Head is "invited to send a case of fish to the Queen of England" (61). While the white owner gets rich and famous, the Chinese boss gets no recognition and must continue to struggle. The unfairness of the situation comes to a climax when Chimney Head purchases a machine "called the Iron Chink" to replace his workers (60). Chimney Head, caring only for making a profit, fires all of his workers, including Lee Jim. The Chinese boss must subsequently decide: either he can finish out his service "mak[ing] sure that everything r[uns] smoothly," or he can avenge the exploited workers in a search for justice (61). In the end, Lee Jim acts defiantly; he tricks Chimney Head into thinking that he has shredded his "baby fingers" into the salmon being sent to the queen (62). While the Chinese workers rejoice by throwing "their arms around Lee Jim" and calling him "a brave man," Chimney Head "curse[s] and stamp[s] his feet" (62). Lee Jim has won a victory for the workers, especially since "his baby fingers [are] still attached to his hands" (62). The admirable depiction of Lee Jim is thus effectively put forward to challenge the dominance of white manliness.

Yee engages with white settler nation-building myths to challenge racist, "yellow peril" stereotypes; however, his stories also perpetuate a common masculine perspective. Re-masculinizing the Chinese Canadian male body ironically involves reaffirming exclusionary notions of manhood, which were once directed at Chinese men, and which continue to mark the female body as subordinate. This tactic can thus be viewed as empowering only by white settler norms of masculinity. Moreover, while trying to restore Chinese Canadian presences in the past, Yee's stories work within a colonial logic, which frames the arrival of settlers as a "noble" conquest of an "empty" and "hostile" wilderness. By completely neglecting to acknowledge Indigenous presences, the stories tacitly build on a framework that "participates in the ongoing colonization" of the land and Indigenous peoples (Lawrence and Dua 127). The strategy of reworking settler nation-building is therefore problematic; it does not consider how the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and exploitation of Chinese immigrants intersect in the making of the white settler colonial nation.

### Developing a Relational Framework

Regarding how Asian Canadian writers and activists can move toward "alliance building in the face of ongoing" colonization and racial oppression, Rita Wong has suggested that more attention needs to be paid to the contact zones of exchange and interaction "where diasporic communities meet Indigenous communities" (160). As she elucidates, such a focus can assist in thinking through "the question of how to speak and acknowledge debts and interdependencies," which have historically been ignored (160). Wong argues that writers, in particular, can play a major role in deepening anti-racist efforts by illuminating "the social and economic injustices neglected and deflected" by a liberal-multiculturalist lens (160). Using an anti-colonial framework, these writers can examine how racial identities are produced relationally in a white settler-colonial state. This kind of approach creates opportunities for meaningful and strategic alliance-building among different groups—opportunities "which are based not solely on shared victimization, but [on the idea] that anyone can be complicit in the victimization of another" (Lee 78). Correspondingly, the challenge for Chinese Canadian writers is to examine the intricate history of relationships between those racialized as "Chinese" and those racialized as "Indigenous," in order to confront interlinked systems of oppression. As Glen Sean Coulthard suggests, such an examination could contribute "invaluable glimpses into the ethical practices and preconditions required for the construction of a more just and sustainable world order" (12).

Importantly, Paul Yee's most recent novel, *A Superior Man*, takes up the challenge of re-articulating Chinese Canadian cultural formations in relation to Indigenous histories, endeavouring to discuss the West Coast of British Columbia as a multifaceted colonial contact zone. Countering the misconception that Indigenous-European contact and Chinese migrations occurred in different historical time periods, Yee portrays how Chinese immigrants were in regular contact with both white settlers and Indigenous peoples. The novel's presentation of Yang Hok, a Chinese railway worker who has had an affair with an Indigenous woman, underscores the idea that the Western Frontier was a space of diversity, which facilitated interracial encounters. Nonetheless, the novel also reveals how colonial "truths" or stereotypes helped to manage differently racialized groups, generating potent divisions and setting these groups against one another. Yang Hok's reluctance to fulfill his obligation and act as a father to his mixed race son animates these tensions, showing how early Chinese immigrants occupied an ambiguous position in the settler colonial state. On one hand, the novel demonstrates how these immigrants were exploited for their labour; yet, on the other hand, it reveals how they enjoyed some settler privileges

and discriminated against Indigenous peoples. Unlike the heroes of nation-building myths, therefore, Yang Hok is depicted as a difficult and anti-heroic character, who is enmeshed in the colonial structures of Indigenous dispossession and oppression, even as he is a victim of white racism. By introducing the concept of “a superior man,” Yee gestures to an alternative way of viewing interracial relations and obligations in the West Coast contact zone, opening a space for relational analyses of how Chinese Canadians are situated within a white settler formation.

### The Colonial Contact Zone

Complicating the marginalized versus dominant, or Chinese versus white, dynamic that frames many Chinese Canadian narratives, Yee endeavours to discuss the colonial contact zone as a diverse space, where various cross-racial entanglements are possible. For example, the narrator-protagonist, Yang Hok, describes how in 1885 interactions between Chinese and Indigenous peoples were common, as “Native traders always passed through Victoria’s Chinatown” to conduct business with “many people [who] spoke Chinook” (Yee, *Superior* 24). Indeed, Yang Hok himself reveals an ability to converse in the pidgin trade language—an ability that points to his reliance on longstanding and mutually beneficial Chinese-Indigenous trade networks. As Renisa Mawani clarifies, such trade networks were historically extensive in British Columbia, forging informal bridges “across racial divides” and showing a level of “collaboration and participation” among differently marginalized groups (202). In some ways, these networks were “ungovernable,” providing a significant method of navigating shared experiences of discrimination and exclusion (204). The colonial proximities and connections, which produced cross-racial alliances and intimacies, are further explored in the novel when Yang Hok discusses his short-lived affair with Mary, an Indigenous woman. In reflecting on what produced his feelings of interracial affinity and attraction, Yang Hok surmises that “[b]oth Mary and [he] were alone and lonely” working in a “makeshift” railway town for corrupt “redbeard” or white bosses (Yee, *Superior* 140). Yang Hok’s comments suggest that Chinese and Indigenous groups were similarly positioned on the borders of white settler society, employed to do “dirty” jobs for whites (140). Despite their different backgrounds, then, Yang Hok and Mary found a point of connection in their “quiet sorrow” and offered one another comfort for a moment in time (140). The fleeting nature of their partnership, however, points to the existence of colonial divisions and racial stereotypes, which were propagated to weaken Chinese-Indigenous relations and the potentially subversive threat they posed.

While the novel demonstrates how the West Coast contact zone created opportunities for close and affective relations across race, it also gestures to how the settler colonial state mobilized racial stereotypes to reinforce social boundaries and manage interracial encounters. Although in private moments of reflection Yang Hok admits to feeling a poignant connection with Mary, in other moments he deploys racially infused, colonial discourses to explain his time with an Indigenous woman. These moments reveal the extent to which Yang Hok has absorbed colonial and discriminatory views of Indigenous peoples as a “lesser rac[e]” (Yee, *Superior* 31). Mawani explains that such views, which produced seemingly “immutable racial distinctions” between white, Indigenous, and Chinese populations, were “precisely” circulated “amidst racial intermixture” to deter cross-racial alliances and mixed race offspring (11). These alliances and their resulting offspring were seen as challenging “imperial visions of European resettlement and white superiority,” and so racial comparisons were promoted to break them up (13). That Yang Hok has been influenced by these racial comparisons is evident when he bristles at the suggestion that “the Chinese [are] one and the same as Native people” (Yee, *Superior* 52). He has learned that such an association is an insult and responds with a series of colonial “truths”—about Indigenous peoples being unrefined or uncultured—to distinguish himself (52). Moreover, Yang Hok has appropriated disparaging colonial stereotypes about Indigenous women to interpret his interactions with Mary and deny his responsibility for their mixed race son. When Mary informs him that they have a child together, for example, Yang Hok responds by calling her a “fox” who could have “spread her legs for any number of China men” (23). In so characterizing Mary, Yang Hok dismisses the sense of affinity that they once shared and casts her off as a “Squaw Drudge [or] a sexually licentious... beast of burden” (Stevenson 57). This stereotype permits Yang Hok to rationalize that he, like other settler men—Chinese and “redbeard”—“cha[se after] Native women” like “dogs in heat” and have no accountability for their “mix-blood” children (Yee, *Superior* 23). Yang Hok’s justification demonstrates how colonial discourses contributed to an antagonistic racialized dynamic, or what Coulthard calls a “relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchal social relations” (14). As Coulthard explains, such a dynamic worked to “sustain colonial patterns of behavior, structures, and relationships,” in part by deflecting attention away from shared experiences (14). Thus, Yang Hok’s disparaging comments about Mary point to a larger, background structure of domination that has shaped historical relationships between Indigenous and racialized communities in Canada.

In emphasizing Yang Hok’s reluctance to accept responsibility for his mixed race son, the novel explores how early Chinese immigrants occupied a conflicted position in the

white settler colonial state. On one hand, the novel illustrates how Chinese “coolies,” or indentured labourers, were subjected to racism, especially while constructing “the iron road” (Yee, *Superior* 134). As Yang Hok recounts, these labourers were often tricked into coming to Canada with promises of well-paying jobs, only to discover that “no one would ever get rich here” (66). The labourers were also assigned the most dangerous duties, placed into “ugly situation[s]” where “blood [was] everywhere” (134). The novel thus underscores the ways that early Chinese immigrants were exploited to build the foundations for colonial settlement. On the other hand, however, the novel examines how Chinese immigrants were complicit, in many ways, with colonial structures that facilitated the dispossession and oppression of Indigenous peoples. After surveying “the wreckage” caused by the railway, for example, Yang Hok realizes that “redbeards” rely on “China men” to carry out the “dirty work” of colonization (Yee, *Superior* 194). What would happen, he wonders, if “China men” rejected the “shit jobs” offered to them by the “redbeards” and went back “home” (152)? Yang Hok comes to understand why some Indigenous people would believe that “China men are the same as redbeards,” as both groups plunder Indigenous lands (235). Moreover, both groups “think [they] are smarter than” Indigenous peoples, while refusing to “care for their own bone and flesh,” their mixed race children (235). Yang Hok’s efforts to disown his son and “dump him with his [mother’s] people” animate these tensions (34). While the novel suggests that Yang Hok’s desire to return to China is somewhat understandable due to the hardships he has experienced, it highlights his absorption in colonial structures of thought and behaviour. More specifically, it reveals his adoption of a dominant, self-interested and aggressive masculinity in trying to disavow the responsibilities he has formed in the West Coast contact zone.

Yang Hok is decidedly anti-heroic; unlike the typical protagonists of nation-building myths, who are portrayed as embodiments of masculine virtue, he depicts the dangers of becoming immersed in prevalent colonial attitudes and norms: he illustrates what is potentially lost in a drive for success and inclusion. Although he has followed a similar trajectory to most protagonists —by undergoing a series of difficulties, performing physical labour, and becoming a self-disciplined wage-earner— he is not upheld as a model citizen. Instead, the novel scrutinizes the very masculine qualities of robust strength and future-orientation that would conventionally position Yang Hok as an idealized subject. At the beginning of the novel, for example, Yang Hok is introduced as a strong labourer, who is “[t]aller than most men” and can “battle three or four men at once” (Yee, *Superior* 9, 17). His previous role as a railway worker suggests that he is a nation-builder. Yang Hok’s status as an admirable pioneer, however, is destabilized by his tendency to emulate his “redbeard”

bosses, who willingly exploit and succeed at the expense of others. To pursue his goals of “sav[ing] money,” Yang Hok has relied on unsavory schemes. As a railway worker, he started a “bootleg” business of smuggling and selling alcohol “in the railway camps” (106); he was quickly reprimanded, however, for doing business with “Native men [who had] wives and children” (108). Importantly, Yang Hok was warned about the immorality of his actions by his Chinese colleagues, who explicitly asked him not to sell to these men. As one colleague expressed, Yang Hok should only sell to “redbeard men [who] don’t have families here,” otherwise he would “make us all smell bad” (108). The colleague worried that Yang Hok’s behaviour would tarnish the reputations of all Chinese workers. That Yang Hok proceeded with his scheme reveals a careless disinterest in how his actions affect others, including his Chinese and Native counterparts. His single-minded concern with making a profit is confirmed by his later stint as a gambling-house bouncer who physically “beat[s]” the customers that a merchant “cheats” (18). The novel hence questions Yang Hok’s self-congratulatory claims that he “[is]n’t a child” or a “railway worm...without the means to leave [Canada]” (21). It asks: is Yang Hok a commendable “man” if he has made his money through exploitative means? The novel effectively draws attention to Yang Hok’s enactment of the same aggressive, cutthroat attitude that characterizes the “redbeard” bosses, who mistreat and denigrate Chinese and Indigenous peoples. In the hostile environment of the West Coast contact zone, Yang Hok is entangled in colonial structures and attitudes, which promote greed and self-promotion as norms. His desire to prove his masculinity and compete with “redbeard” bosses encourages him to assume a dominant masculinity, which effaces the concerns of others.

### A Superior Man

Throughout his mission to find Mary and “dump the boy” (Yee, *Superior* 41), Yang Hok is repeatedly challenged by his Chinese and mixed race counterparts to act as a “good father” and become “a superior man” (131). Sam Bing Lew, the guide that Yang Hok hires to help him track down Mary, for instance, consistently troubles Yang Hok’s reasoning that “A boy belongs with his trueborn mother” (125). Sam Bing, whose father was Chinese and mother was Indigenous, suspects that Yang Hok is trying to shirk his parental responsibility. He knows how many “railway snot worms...look down on” mixed race children, regarding these children as “dirty mongrel[s]” with “no brains” (77). Furthermore, he witnesses how Yang Hok dismisses his son, worrying only about his ticket to China, which might expire before he finds Mary (81). In response, Sam Bing acts as a more positive role model to



the young boy; he “sp[eaks directly] to the boy,” tells him stories, and walks “hand-in-hand” with him (78, 79). Sam Bing’s caring attentiveness underscores Yang Hok’s immersion in a colonial and self-interested way of thinking; even Yang Hok must admit that Sam Bing is, in many ways, “superior to me” (91). Similarly, when Yang Hok meets “old Yang” (123), a Chinese “washerman” with a mixed race daughter, his lack of fatherly concern and sense of obligation is highlighted. The older Chinese man is critical of Yang Hok for not “even know[ing]” his own son (131). In contrast to Yang Hok, old Yang has raised his daughter on his own. The girl’s mother died a long time ago, and so he has acted as primary caretaker, showing more regard for her welfare than about what other people think (131). The comparison between the older and the younger man undermines Yang Hok’s apparent logic for “drag[ging] the boy to his mother” (130); as old Yang points out, the “[t]ruth is” Yang Hok does not want to take his son to China, as he is anxious about “los[ing] face” (130). Underneath Yang Hok’s excuses, his objective in “dumping the boy” is probably to return to his home-village without the complication of having a mixed race son. Significantly, both Sam Bing and old Yang call on Yang Hok to abandon his investments in colonial attitudes and norms; they urge him to become “a superior man,” a term that suggests he live up to a Confucian ideal of manhood.

Although Yang Hok has become enmeshed in a dominant, colonial masculinity, which is premised on physical prowess, competitiveness, and aggression, the novel points to an alternative form of masculinity in its references to “a superior man.” Unlike its Western counterpart, the Confucian concept of “a superior man” is determined by one’s ethical accomplishments and virtuous choices, “instead of...by male gender traits” (Rosenlee 36). In other words, “a superior man” is associated with one’s fulfilment of social roles and responsibilities, not necessarily with one’s attainment of so-called masculine qualities such as strength, assertiveness, and autonomy (36). As Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee elaborates, “a superior man” is someone who has promoted “harmony” by nurturing “proper relations” and “acting for the good of others, not for the good of one’s narrow, selfish interest” (38). According to this definition, Yang Hok has strayed far from the Confucian ideal. Although he plans to take his earnings to China to support his grandparents, he shows the influence of colonial structures when he refuses to recognize his son (Yee, *Superior* 24). In so doing, Yang Hok defies Confucian teachings, which consider the parent-child relationship one of the most important to uphold. Moreover, Yang Hok’s desire to return to China is not entirely based on Confucian ideals of honourability. While he wants to help his grandparents, he also wants to impress the other villagers with his wealth and prestige (21). For instance, Yang Hok envisions propping his “feet on a table and gloat[ing] over” the men who are

still “snared in Gold Mountain shit” (25). This self-glorifying dream suggests that Yang Hok is invested in colonial notions of material and hierarchal success, not the Confucian moral attributes of “a superior man.” Further, Yang Hok’s competitive tendency to set his economic achievements against those of others contrasts with the peaceful vision of “a superior man.” Antonio Cua explains that “a superior man” acts in an honest way to produce the best outcomes (326). Unfortunately, Yang Hok’s colonial masculinity obscures his ability to be honest. Upon relinquishing his son to Sam Bing’s mother, he realizes that he has been behaving in a manner “worse than vermin” (327). All along, he has been lying, knowing that he ought to “take the boy to China” or stay behind to raise him (333). As he later admits in shame, “I was his father, but I had walked away” (343). Yang Hok discovers too late that he has been caught up in prevailing colonial structures, focusing too much on a damaging vision of manhood and success.

### Perpetuating Colonial Violence

Unlike Chinese Canadian narratives that can implicitly position early Chinese immigrants as outside of white settler colonial formations (Lawrence and Dua 132), *A Superior Man* addresses the complex relationships that these immigrants had with Indigenous peoples. Although dependent on Chinese-Indigenous networks to navigate the landscape, Yang Hok enacts a dominant masculinity that is complicit, in many ways, with colonial structures that dominate and dispossess Indigenous peoples. It is symptomatic of the white settler colonial state, and its propagation of colonial stereotypes, that Yang Hok starts to function within hierarchal, racialized concepts of segregation, selfishly looking out for his own self-interest and material wealth. Indeed, Yang Hok’s adoption of a dominant, colonial masculinity is presented as a defensive response to the discrimination he has faced. Nonetheless, the novel highlights the inadequacies of such a response, showing how it contributes to the very aggression and violence he wants to resist. For example, Yang Hok’s inclination for vengeance, which is inspired by his own oppression in colonial structures, is framed as destructive. At the end of the novel, when Yang Hok is set to return to China alone, he engages in another attempt to redeem his “failed” manhood by devising a scheme to blow up a railway bridge (Yee, *Superior* 315). The scheme is dangerous and poorly planned, leading to tragic consequences. While trying to demolish the bridge, Yang Hok contributes to the untimely death of a “redbeard” railway worker—a death that, through a twist of circumstances, Sam Bing is held responsible for. The novel thus concludes in a cautionary manner, suggesting that Yang Hok should have perhaps cared more about his obligations to Sam Bing and his

son than his efforts to prove his manliness. Moreover, since Sam Bing is ultimately blamed for Yang Hok's actions, it points to how mixed race and Indigenous peoples faced higher social stakes in the white settler colonial state. That Sam Bing is presumably going to be executed without a fair trial gestures to the ugly reality of colonial injustices and policies of Indigenous genocide. In this way, the novel underscores how Chinese Canadian and Indigenous struggles were co-existing and relational, but definitely not equivalent.

Throughout the novel, Yee encourages readers to ask what would have happened if Yang Hok could have acted as "a superior man" —What if there was space for interracial solidarity within colonial structures? What would these structures look like if they could be challenged to enable this solidarity? Yang Hok's immersion in colonial attitudes and norms, as well as his inability to fully nurture his relationships with Mary, Sam-Bing, and his son, lend weight to these questions. His experiences emphasize the need for a relational approach to understanding the complex positioning of Chinese Canadians in a multifaceted colonial contact zone.

Nonetheless, while the novel provides an important entry point for thinking about the complexity of Chinese-Indigenous relationships in Canada, its positioning of Indigenous peoples as largely peripheral figures reveals the amount of relational and anti-colonial thinking that remains to be done. For example, the Indigenous woman, Mary, with whom Yang Hok has had an affair plays a very limited role in the novel's action. Despite setting the plot in motion —when she "suddenly appear[s]" and leaves the mixed race son with Yang Hok (Yee, *Superior* 25)—Mary's presence in the novel is highlighted by silence, mystery, and absence; she has a habit of disappearing just as quickly as she appears. In describing how their romantic relationship ended, for instance, Yang Hok insists that "Three years ago, she vanished without a word" (24); he claims to have no idea why she left him or where she went. Likewise, he can only speculate on her motivations for giving up their mixed race son, as she provides no direct explanation (27). Mary thus largely remains an enigma to both Yang Hok and the reader. Her peripheral presence may suggest how Yang Hok felt compelled to sacrifice potentially fulfilling relationships with Indigenous peoples to meet colonial structures and norms. On the other hand, her limited representation may indicate an awareness of the dangers of representational appropriation. Either way, Mary's restricted voice risks carrying on the tradition of novels using Indigenous characters as a literary device or backdrop.

Along these same lines, it is also potentially problematic that the mixed race guide, Sam Bing, acts as the novel's primary Indigenous spokesperson. As a character who presumably "speaks all dialects" (Yee, *Superior* 75), Sam Bing is presented as a kind of middle-man who carries messages between populations. Yet, because he is infrequently

involved in his "Native village" due to his lengthy and solo trading missions (325), he can also only offer glimpses into the interests and concerns of his mother's people. Indeed, Sam Bing is at times revealed to be ambiguously situated in Indigenous society, as the Indigenous mother of his child and her family are said to have "rejec[ted]" him and "dr[i]ve[n] him away" (327). The lack of Indigenous perspective in the novel is somewhat striking given Yang Hok's occasional admissions that Indigenous peoples are "everywhere," as well as his recognition that Chinese immigrants have contributed to their "poverty and suffering" (201). It, therefore, seems like Yee is relying on Sam Bing's character as a way of gesturing towards Indigenous presence, while also steering clear of more difficult issues of representation and engagement. Whatever the reason, the novel mostly neglects to provide Indigenous characters with a significant voice, leaving the reader to imagine the complexity of Indigenous experiences, as well as what meaningful alliances with Indigenous peoples might look like. Significantly, then, the novel's challenge to Yang Hok —to challenge colonial structures and expand his vision— lingers, encouraging Chinese Canadian writers and activists to further build inter-racialized Asian-Indigenous friendships and acknowledge debts, even while continuing to confront the racial injustice and exploitation experienced by racialized Asian Canadians. *A Superior Man* therefore offers a poignant invitation to navigate, and join forces, across historically entrenched divides, encouraging more understanding of Canada as a multifaceted colonial contact zone.

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