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HITTING THE NAIL ON THE HEAD TAX: An Interview with William Dere and Malcolm Guy

by Larissa Lai

In 1884, the B.C. government imposed a Head Tax of \$10 on every Chinese immigrant entering Canada. In 1886, the federal government followed suit, imposing a \$50 Head Tax. In 1900, it went up to \$100, and in 1904 to \$500. In 1923, the Chinese Immigration Act was passed prohibiting Chinese immigration altogether, although those who had paid the Head Tax were permitted to stay. The Act was repealed in 1947 in response to international pressure.

Presently, there is a movement to pressure the Canadian government to redress the Chinese for that treatment, as redress has been granted to the Japanese who were interned during World War II. However, the Chinese community is divided on the issue. Many feel that it was such a long time ago that it no longer matters. In addition, there is a measure of shame that goes with dredging up the degradation of the past. Others feel that redress is necessary and urgent since those who paid the Head Tax will soon have all died off. Many believe that the Canadian government is merely stalling until few or none of that generation are left before it will seriously address the problem. There is further debate over which organizations within the community have jurisdiction over the issue.

William Dere and Malcolm Guy are co-producing a film on the Head Tax entitled *It's Only Fair*.

LL: *Why did you decide to make the film in the first place?*

WD: I'm actively engaged in the redress committee for the Head Tax and Chinese Exclusion Act.

LL: *That's the redress committee organized by whom?*

WD: The campaign is being led by the CCNC (the Chinese Canadian National Council), but here in Montreal we decided to form a local redress committee which would include various individuals and organizations who might not necessarily be affiliated with the CCNC.

LL: *Such as?*

WD: For instance, there's the Chinese Family Service and the Chinese Neighbourhood Society. We also have individuals. It's mainly the individuals who are doing a lot of the work in the community. These individuals are not associated with any of these two organizations nor with the CCNC. That was the purpose of our committee – to bring in people who were independent but who feel very strongly about redress for the Head Tax... I felt that culture, through the media would be a better way of doing it than making

speeches and logical arguments. We wanted a way to present our own culture, and through the culture and through the emotions, show that what happened to the Chinese happened to human beings who had families, who had wives, children, mothers, husbands, and so on, who were deeply affected by the Exclusion Act and the Head Tax...

To write a book takes too much work on the part of the individual to absorb the ideas because he has to do some reading. In a film you might not take everything in, but at least the images would evoke some response from individuals, so we thought a film would probably be the most powerful medium to do this.

LL: *Do you want to say something about the content of the film?*

WD: It's a personal journey going back to the history of my father and my grandfather in Canada at the turn of the century. It's a search of discovery for me to find out what kind of problems they had. I never knew my father until I was seven. My family was kept back at home when my father was here in Canada. We never really developed a so-called "normal" relationship in which he would tell me about things, about what happened to him in the past...



very happy with it, although it's difficult because there's a part on the underground, so it's dangerous for them to show it.

LL: What about the role of women? You were saying you wanted to pull that in.

WD: The role of women is a very strong issue. They kept the families together back home, and they were able to keep the families together here, despite ten, twenty, thirty years of separation; and despite the type of oppression that they underwent here as women, and as Chinese women.

LL: Meaning what?

WD: When they came here, they were reunited with a husband they hardly knew. People like my father were brought over to work in the laundry. Because they were not able to make ends meet, a lot of women had to find outside work, as in a factory. When my mother came home from the factory, before she took her shoes off, she would have to plug in the iron; because then she would work in the laundry, then she had to cook and do the housework. So, it was like triple duty time, that was not abnormal for a lot of women.

LL: And there were how many kids running around?

WD: My mother was lucky, she only had me. If you had two or three other kids, then... So as the story goes, they were brought here to look after their sick or elderly husbands. When the husbands died they were left alone. Because of the cultural and generational gap that existed between the mothers and the children who grew up here, a lot of these women were left alone. Many of them ended up down in Chinatown. Many of them would try to seek independence and refuge with other women like themselves. So the effects of the Head Tax and the Chinese Exclusion Act continue today, in these women.

LL: Can I ask you where your funding came from?

MG: Both of us applied to the Canada Council section and we got a grant to begin. With that we started filming. We are going to apply to Multiculturalism and we are going to apply to Supply and Services. We are also going to go to some private sources as well. We were hoping to go to Canadian Pacific, since the Chinese built the railway. We thought it was about time they helped us show that story. There are others, like perhaps Air Canada...

LL: You don't think that will change the nature of your story?

MG: If it does, we'll send the money back...



Photo by William Dere

LL: Are you going to find out the particulars about your own family?

WD: Most men of my father's generation are dead. Exactly how they lived in the thirties, or forties, or twenties, is going to be very difficult to put together unless I can locate a lot of his close friends. Many of them have already passed away... I'm trying to put together a picture through my mother, my brother, my sisters, and friends who may have known him, such as James Wing, the other principle character in this film. It's also his journey back to his past from a detention camp in Vancouver. That was his first introduction to Canada. We'll also look at his life and how the Head Tax and Chinese Exclusion Act has affected him. Then we'll enlarge it to the entire community.

LL: (to Malcolm Guy) How do you feel about your involvement in the film as a non-Asian? Is it problematic for you?

MG: No, it's not problematic, it's clear to me who I am and where I came from. I try to use my skills to allow Chinese Canadians to say what they have to say, and perhaps train a few so that there's something left behind. It's been a natural process because we worked together in the Exclusion campaign. We said let's do the film. William didn't have any film experience at the time. If he had, probably my role would have been different.

WD: I'm presently writing the script, and initially, I felt that this should be a political statement. But as we went along, Malcolm's been encouraging me to bring out the personal aspect. I needed his probing to develop that. I think we work together quite well so he can bring a less involved eye to what happened to our people, to bring it out.

I think both Malcolm and I have a very strong political commitment and belief towards this film. No matter how long it takes, this film is going to get done. It's a film that needs to be done...

LL: Is it going to be a purely historical film? There's a parallel, I think, between what happened at the end of the last century and what's happening now.

MG: Yeah, then we didn't want the Chinese because they were too poor and now we don't want them because they are too rich. It's that same kind of link, in the sense of racist and discriminatory laws. And they're continuing today. Most of the people, the pioneers of this country, would not be allowed in today. In that sense, it's very up to date. Yes, it's something from the past, but the same kinds of things are happening today.

LL: And there's that financial requirement there.

MG: Before it was five hundred dollars, now it's five hundred thousand, and you can still get in. But you still have to pay that head tax.

WD: It's still based on economic criteria, and not social or human criteria. That's been the issue. That's what pushes this kind of racism on our people today, as well as in the past.

LL: Do you plan to include the new generation, or is it going to be based on the generation that came with the railroad?

WD: The story of the present generation is a story that is still evolving. It's a story that can be developed as time goes on. But the story of the past, there's a certain urgency to it because many of these people are dying, and we don't want the stories to die with them.

LL: You were working on a film about Filipino women before.

MG: Yeah, well I worked on that with my partner. We felt strongly from the beginning that there has been a problem of outsiders' involvement in the communities and we've always tried to be sensitive to the fact that they have their own story to tell, and that if we can use our skills to allow them to tell that story then we should do that. So for the women's film, for example, there were women's organizations and individuals who wanted to tell their story. So we went out and found funding, and they chose the people they wanted to interview and through them we discussed what we wanted and the film on the women come out of it. They're

video?

WD: Well, we thought about making a video and we thought if we don't get enough money we'll make a video. (Laughs.) Technically, there's a huge difference between film and video. Aesthetically, there's a huge difference. Just to capture the expanse of this subject we thought we could only do it justice on film. For archival reasons too, we want to have some sort of a record of this story that only a film could provide.

LL: Do you think it will still be relevant in ten years?

WD: Well, the relevance of it depends on how we deal with the issue because it's a human story, and it could happen again.

LL: I was thinking more in terms of the mandate behind the film. It's as though you're expecting something to come out of it.

WD: What we're expecting out of it is government redress, but...

LL: Financial redress?

WD: Well, that has to be negotiated between the government and our communities. But that doesn't take away from the stories in this film, because these stories are the stories of a people who came to Canada, who come to build Canada.

LL: Where do you think the film is going to be shown?

MG: One of the reasons we wanted to do film, not that you can't blow up a video, was to get as wide an audience as possible. If we can get television distribution, that's fine, but we decided not to go for that first, to not tie our hands in terms of length, of the form nor in the type of story we hope to tell. We hope to present it to television afterwards. We hope that the story will be strong enough that they'll take it. If not, the CCNC has already agreed to help distribute it among their chapters. If necessary, we'll go around and hawk it ourselves. (Laughs.) I think it's important that the story be known outside of Canada. The myth that Canada is the land that treated its native population so well, but also that treated its newcomers well...

WD: I think we would like to break the whole stereotype — when you make film on a certain group of people, a minority group, that the audience is so limited. I don't believe that the audience is so limited. 