

Obituaries

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JAMES PON ENGINEER AND ACTIVIST, 95

He led the call for Chinese head-tax redress

Overcoming racial barriers to pursue studies and a career, his crusade led to a federal apology for decades of legislated discrimination

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When the Redress Express rolled into Ottawa on June 22, 2006, James Pon and his cohort, a handful of the few hundred remaining Chinese-Canadian head-tax payers, arrived to hear Prime Minister Stephen Harper utter five unfamiliar syllables:

“Ja Na Da Do Heep.”

“Canada apologizes.”

Mr. Pon, the face of the movement for redress, gave Mr. Harper the ceremonial last spike with the Prime Minister's promise that it would be displayed in Parliament's historic Railway Committee Room. This was the very room where prime minister Sir John A. Macdonald pledged to import 15,000 Chinese labourers to save his transcontinental railway project.

Then Mr. Pon planted a smile on his face and positioned himself beside Mr. Harper for the obligatory photo op.

“I am grateful that I have lived to see this day after years of trying to get Canada just to say sorry,” he told the media.

This contemporary photograph was a startling contrast to the iconic photo of railway spikes presented to a group of white diplomats and hardscrabble navies at the 1885 ceremony in Craigellachie, B.C.

For that photo op, no Chinese workers were invited. Mr. Pon's grandfather, who laid railway ties on the CPR line, was among those absent.

Much of James Pon's work has been to educate Canadians about legislated racism inflicted against Chinese immigrants during the building of the railway and several subsequent decades, including the notorious head tax levied at the end of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th. “James Pon made a major contribution to getting recognition by the Canadian government, who had this racist legislation such as the head tax, and I think that's written in the annals of Canadian history,” said Barbara Hall, chief commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission and a former Toronto mayor.

“On a personal level, what he and his work did was to open me to parts of Canadian history to which I was never exposed in the Canadian school system,” Ms. Hall added.

In 1922, when James was 5, there was a \$500 head tax imposed on him and his mother when they emigrated from the southern Chinese province of Guangdong to join his father in Killam, Alta., where he ran a small restaurant. James's sister was left behind in China.

At 12, during the Depression, James was sent to work in another town to help pay off the tax debt and add to the family coffers. He mopped floors, scoured dirty plates and carried slop from the restaurant to feed the pigs.

At night, he slumped against his bedpost with a collection of open schoolbooks; he was keen for an education.

He went on to become a member of the Association of Professional Engineers of Ontario.

While working as a design engineer at De Havilland, he assisted in the production of the Mosquito aircraft. For this, he won a Governor-General's Medal in 1942 for aiding Canada's war effort.

Mr. Pon was hired by De Havilland Aircraft only after a sympathetic recruiter secretly



James Pon, holding the railway's last spike to give to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, before Mr. Harper issued a formal apology in 2006. TOM HANSON/CP

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Barbara Hall
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changed the race on his application from “yellow” to “white.”

James Pon died in Toronto on March 22, of complications from a heart attack. He was 95. He leaves his wife, Vera, his children, Louise, Karen and Douglas, and grandson Jason.

He was born in 1918, six years after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, as China groaned beneath the weight of massive government chaos and grinding poverty.

His father was already in Canada and wanted his wife and son to escape that hell.

But as it turned out, small-town Alberta presented a fresh kind of horror. “There was lots of racism,” Mr. Pon said in an interview for the commemorative website *The Ties That Bind*. “You were the only Chinese in town, and people pick on you ... they call you ‘chinky chinky Chinaman.’”

Young white ruffians frequently got drunk and trashed his family's restaurant. But fortunately, his father, “a happy-go-lucky” man, befriended the local justice of the peace, who came to the restaurant for T-bone steak, coffee and fruit pie. With his help, the ruffians were quickly charged and penalized.

Mr. Pon spoke about how painful it was to be separated from his parents and be expected to help out financially while still only a boy. One of his fears was about failing to get an education, but he made it through high school against all odds and mostly through self-directed study.

At 21, he was given a chance to learn aircraft design at Toronto's Central Technical School, thanks once again to his father's friend, the justice of the peace, who made it possible for young James to beat the racist admissions policy.

His first job after graduation was at De Havilland, a company pumped up with the war efforts and rolling out the famed Mosquito bomber.

Mr. Pon was hired to wear a suit and draft designs, but once it was discovered he was Chinese, not Caucasian, he said, they moved him onto the floor as a sheet metal worker instead.

Rather than make waves with his new employer, especially considering how challenging it had been to get hired at all, he practised designs during off-work hours. Remarkably, he won acclaim for designing an automatic riveting gun that significantly sped up aircraft production. Without a pause, he was invited to hang up his overalls and join the engineering department.

In 1943, Mr. Pon married Vera Wong and together they moved his career forward first by settling in Troy, N.Y., while he studied engineering at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He graduated in 1953 and a year later emerged with a bachelor's degree in engineering and a masters in business from the University of Michigan.

He joined Atomic Energy of Canada in 1959 as a nuclear engineer, retiring nearly a quarter-century later. Once settled in his career, he began to pay more attention to his Chinese roots.

In 1966, he co-founded the Mon Sheong Foundation, mandated to promote Chinese culture, heritage, language and philosophy. This led to establishing a 65-bed residence for Chinese seniors in Toronto – pioneers, he called them – the first of its kind in Canada.

He also facilitated cultural exchanges between China and Canada, including one with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra.

And he played a role in forging a Friendship Accord between Doctors Hospital in Toronto and the Bethune International Peace Hospital in China.

In 1989, Mr. Pon helped establish a large public memorial near the rail line in downtown Toronto, dedicated to the thousands of Chinese workers who died while working on the building of the railroad that went through the Rocky Mountains. The art installation is located on the GO transit rush-hour route; commuters see it as a daily reminder.

The memorial depicts two life-sized men manoeuvring a huge beam into place, demonstrating the dangers inherent in the work. The trestle is wood and concrete.

“Thousands drifted near destitution along the completed track,” reads the text at the site. “All of them remained nameless in the history of Canada.”

Thanks to Mr. Pon, much less so.

His work on head-tax redress became the strongest part of his social and community legacy, and in this crusade he came a long, long way.

He once hid his head tax certificate from his children, concerned they'd think less of their Canadian homeland. But something shifted in him in the early 1980s, a kind of shout-it-from-the-rooftop thing albeit in Mr. Pon's gentle voice and manner.

“He became the face of the cause across the country,” said Susan Eng, former co-chair of the Ontario Coalition of Chinese Head Tax Payers and Families.

“He articulated his story without any recrimination, he would just say it matter-of-factly and that made it all the more powerful.”

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