Gu Xiong

THE UNKNOWN REMAINS
INTRODUCTION

Written by: Astrid Heyerdahl

Touchstones Nelson: Museum of Art and History welcomed the critical, site-specificity of Gu Xiong's brilliant work, *The Unknown Remains*. Never before has an artist occupied both gallery spaces at Touchstones Nelson Museum and brought such a pertinent historical topic to the fore in this manner. Through the unveiling of hidden historical narratives, the interweaving of everyday stories once set aside as inconsequential, and the convergence of contemporary art and archival material, Gu Xiong not only revealed, but created a greater communal connection in this region.

Gu Xiong’s work grows from a rootedness in each community he visits. Collaborating with local citizens, curators, artists, historians, and archivists allows for authentic understanding and re/presentation of place. *The Unknown Remains* inevitably invited new audience members into the space as it prompted necessary critical conversation about the presentation of hegemonic history—further pushing the Museum to break free of these long-standing narrowing traditions.

We thank Gu Xiong for sharing his artistic practice, and for generating such important dialogue in our community. Thank you to Arin Fay, Curator, who supported Gu Xiong through his research process and the creation of *The Unknown Remains*. Thank you to Andrew Hunter for his wonderful contributions to the project. We also thank the many volunteers, staff and Board who participated in bringing this project to life.

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–Astrid Heyerdahl, M.A, M.Ed.

Executive Director
“Strike.” We heard this word many times in China and we dreamed that one day it would become true in our lives. But this was impossible in China. Here in Canada, though, everything is possible.

I went on strike when I worked at the university cafeteria in 1992. I tested all the meanings behind this word through my actions. We had paid a lot for it. Freedom and democracy are not easy.

STRIKE 1995
charcoal on canvas | 5.5” x 8” | Gu Xiong
Nelson is not a familiar city in BC for me. When the Executive Director Astrid Heyerdahl and Curator Arin Fay asked me to create a show related to Nelson Chinese immigrants’ history at the Touchstones Nelson: Museum of Art and History last year, I realized Nelson is far to the east of Vancouver. Through my previous research on Chinese immigrant history in Canada, I went to many cities and small towns in BC, but I haven’t yet explored the history of Chinese immigrants in Nelson and the Kootenays. It was new to me and I got excited.

May 2019, I went to Nelson for the first time. The city is surrounded by mountains and the Kootenay River. I felt a sense of familiarity because it was like my hometown of Chongqing in China, which is a mountain city surrounded by rivers. I liked Nelson immediately. I started to meet people like Fred Wah, Tim Jay, Kwala Smith, Clement Lam, Janson Xiao, Greg Nesteroff and many others who knew about Chinese history in Nelson. My friend and Nelson resident Stephen Metcalf drove me around the city looking for Chinese historical sites. I also spent time with archivist Jean-Philippe Stienne in the Shawn Lamb Archive at Touchstones Nelson Museum, digging through old photos and newspapers for traces of Chinese immigrants in Nelson and Revelstoke. Cathy English, the Director of the Revelstoke Museum and Archives also sent me many old photos and files about early Chinese immigrants in Revelstoke, and I also researched several images from the Royal BC Museum & Archives. All of the images and text came together in
my mind and a vision of a long journey emerged in front of me.

The early Chinese came to Nelson, Revelstoke and the Kootenays as mining and railroad labourers starting from 1865. They were hard-workers but they got paid 50% less than white workers. They couldn’t bring their families to Canada because of the Head Tax, the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885, and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923-1947. Some workers even committed suicide.

The first Chinatown was built on Vernon Street in 1892, and in 1898 it was ordered by the city to move to a lower area on Lake Street, so that the residents would be “comparatively isolated.”

Later, the Chinese were only allowed to work in the restaurant and laundry

Gu Xiong speaking at the exhibit opening, 2019.
businesses, or as house servants and laborers in gardens and vegetable farms. Generations of Chinese worked hard in those jobs and made a great contribution to the city of Nelson and its people. Businesses include: Mar Sam Laundry, Wo Lee Garden, Charlie Bing Vegetable Farm, The Diamond Grill, LD Cafe, New Star Cafe, and The KC Restaurant and the list goes on.

Chinese immigrants went to English school to learn the new language. They formed basketball teams and music groups. They joined the army during the Second World War to fight for their country. They formed their own business associations and other organizations to be able to integrate within their adopted society. Meanwhile, they opened Chinese language schools in order to maintain their cultural roots and form hybrid identities.

Starting from the bottom of society, working at low paying jobs as a labourer, I had similar experiences as the early Chinese immigrants. I landed in Vancouver 30 years ago. At the beginning I worked at a laundromat, car wash, pizza parlor, and I worked as a busboy at the cafeteria at the University of British Columbia. Then I finally found a job as a Technician, then a Sessional Instructor at several universities. I finally became a full professor at UBC. Throughout this long journey, I kept making my artwork, to share my thoughts as an individual who crosses boundaries and passes through different cultural zones.

The inheritance and innovation of culture are achieved through the contributions of many generations. Cultural identity does not come out of idle talk. It comes from persistence and constant effort by an individual despite years of adversity. It is forged by the conflicts between cultures. It is forged by the struggles of a person's body and mind. It is not the extension of the original culture, nor a repetition of the unfamiliar new culture. It is what happens when a person is put in purgatory, but fights for release.

I am happy to see that a stone monument was erected at the corner of Hall and Vernon Street in Nelson, commemorating Nelson’s Chinatown in 2011, and a road to Charlie Bing vegetable farm was named Bing Road. After over 100 years, society finally gave recognition and acknowledgement to Chinese immigrants and their contributions in Nelson.

A long journey of migration, a journey of cultural transformation, a journey of the unknown, a journey that remains…

—Gu Xiong
We have changed a lot since we came here, but one thing we could not change is eating rice. A kernel of rice has its own experience in nature. I can still smell the soil of the fields in China. I can still remember the difficulty cultivating it. Rice is a symbol of nature, and my energy comes from it. It is also a symbol of traditional Chinese culture, in which everything is related to nature. We are all part of nature, and we have to keep in touch with it.

One day when I got onto a bus and sat down, an old lady who sat in front of me handed me a note, which read: “Your zipper is down.” But I didn’t understand the meaning of “zipper,” and I hadn’t brought my English-Chinese dictionary with me, so I asked her what she meant. She was very embarrassed by my question, but she turned toward me and pointed it out. I looked down at my jeans, and finally, I understood.
Soon after we first spoke on the phone, my parents came to visit us. One day we showed them how to use the public washrooms. My father was surprised by them. He told me the first time he used a western-style washroom was in Beijing at the Canadian Airlines office. He thought it was something that could only happen in heaven. But he found they were very common here.

I remember when I first came to Canada, I was afraid to touch any of the buttons on the washroom equipment. One day I used the hand dryer, and I could not turn it off. I thought that I had damaged it, and I left there very quickly.
行路難 行路難 多岐路 今安在  A journey is hard, A
journey is long, So many turns, Now where am I?
The Unknown Remains, Installation Detail.
Art became indispensable to me when I was a sent-down youth during the Cultural Revolution (1972–76) in China. Four years of long and tedious labour in the countryside dampened my spirit and nearly ground down my will. Nevertheless, I always insisted on recording my experiences in my sketchbooks. Drawing was not just a hobby or pastime, but in fact the only thing that gave me hope. Over the span of four years I filled twenty-five sketchbooks, through which I found, held on to and sustained my inner voice. I was unable to break through the limits imposed by my historical conditions, but I was able to rely on and develop my art while waiting for positive changes to come. The twenty-five books I completed at that time have become important historical and artistic documents of that period.

Art has led me out of darkness. We are still on our way to a brighter future.

—Gu Xiong
The Unknown Remains, Installation Detail.

**Bing Farm** | 4 inkjet prints | 18”x24” | Gu Xiong

**Bing Farm Truck** | photo banner | 88”x132” | Gu Xiong

**Bing Farm Truck Door** | Generously loaned by: Kwala Smith
The Unknown Remains: Curatorial Essay

Written by: Arin Fay

My art seeks to delve into the dynamics of globalization, local culture and individual shifts in identity, and rethink the space of global culture flows. (Gu Xiong, Rethinking Cultural Transformation, 2016)

The history of Nelson, like the history of ‘everyplace’ holds the story of forgotten and yet instrumental people, people like Charlie Bing and Jung Ling. Such figures are often obscured by history and their contributions and representative roles within the culture of the day forgotten. By isolating and illuminating such people The Unknown Remains not only makes ‘our’ history relevant but it forces us to recognize ‘our’ complicit place in the great ennui of history and homogenization. If the current climate of reconciliation and the importance of acknowledging the concept of time immemorial in regards to Indigenous culture has taught us anything, it is that we must not build atop the broken and abused foundation of colonialism and cultural compartmentalization but stop and really recognize the individuals that this ‘progress’ effects. Art allows us this view, and Gu Xiong’s microcosmic presentation of past and present is alive with people who need to be seen, in teeny tiny photos ten feet from the ground, to massive portraits: migrant workers, house servants, the grandchildren of farmers, poets … mothers and daughters, and artists (without and within).

Gu Xiong pulls together threads of commonality and discord with the exhibition The Unknown Remains from Chongqing, Sichuan, China, to Daba Mountain area in northeastern Sichuan, to the Niagara region in Ontario, to Jamaica, to the Bing farm in the Kootenay Valley and many places in between. This artist has embarked upon a dedicated academic and artistic study of diaspora and disenfranchisement that is
beautifully and often brutally intertwined but ultimately full of hope.

The landscape of the gallery space at Touchstones Nelson Museum of Art and History is but one iteration of the ongoing work that Gu Xiong has undertaken to place one’s self as an archetype within a structure that does not readily acknowledge the sum of its parts. The cogs in the machine, the makers of things taken for granted, the marginalized and the forgotten agents of industry, and obscured places and displaced people, are all given place and space, and hence importance, in the grand scheme of this art/history installation, alongside and in correlation to the personal story and spectre of Gu Xiong and his family. Synergy and symbolism tie this installation together; exposing the strength and also isolation of individuals and communities who are often unseen.

The large grid, which is comprised of migrant workers and global immigrants, speaks to this aspect, of the individual obscured by scale, and the fruits of that labour lost behind the dehumanizing assembly line of commerce and the undercurrents of colonialism that reach every shore. Gu Xiong has done this with scope and sensitivity, and with a spectacular visual language which both dwarfs and individualizes the human condition and runs the gamut from the personal to global realities. The cargo ship, which is created by so much manufactured matter, symbolizes the sheer scale of such invisible contribution, intention and action, in its compartmentalized parts. How a thing (anything) is created by the force of untold labour and is moved by powers not of its own making. The ship works in concert with the many faces and frames on the walls; views of cause and effect, commodity and culture, movement and
marginalization, which ply the waters of the world without thought to the human toil, cost or individual trajectory that allow it to be so.

By having an artist of the stature of Gu Xiong place ‘our’ history within the compendium of a global perspective, and humanize the cause and effect of erasure, we are enlightened and emboldened to better understand ‘our’ place within larger flawed systems. And given the gravity of current political discourse, this can only be seen as positive.

The white cube of the gallery space, which is often derided as a place of austere privilege, may also, as in this case, be capable of encapsulating complicated ideas with aesthetic aplomb. Gu Xiong’s personal, political, and place-specific treatment of ideas, history, and influence, is a wonder to behold, like a small boat in the midst of a seemingly endless sea.

“We are like seeds” Xiong states in his poem Home (1999), and like seeds the movement and cross-pollination of people move unhindered by lines drawn by politics and the writing of history, and it is the seeds that find purchase in the forgotten places and thrive and grow.

–Arin Fay, Curator
Yellow Cargo (PG 19, Bottom)
Installation | 41’x10’x13’ | 2019

1500 Cardboard shipping boxes, and video projection
**The Unknown Remains**, Installation Detail.

6 charcoal drawings | 2019

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**Illuminated Niagara Falls** (PG 20)
Mixed media installation | 350sqft | 2019

1500 (4"x6") photos, 6 Ontario Fruit Baskets, 15 bottles of Niagara Falls Illuminated Water
Kwala Smith is the granddaughter of Charlie Bing, she lives on his vegetable farm. Charlie Bing came to Victoria in 1900 from Hong Kong, and moved to Nelson around 1913. He had a vegetable farm at Willow Point, worked very hard to produce many vegetables, and drove a Dodge truck delivering to the people in and around Nelson. In 1996, an easement on the North Shore was named Bing Road. Bing farm still remains in the family. Charlie Bing contributed significantly to the Nelson community over his lifetime and his name was familiar throughout the city not only because of his vegetable trucks, but also because of his positive presence and commitment to Nelson.
Yellow Cargo
Installation | 41’x10’x13’ | 2019
1500 Cardboard shipping boxes, and video projection
The Unknown Remains, Installation Detail.

Yellow Cargo | installation | 41’ x 10’ | 2019

1500 Cardboard shipping boxes, and video projection
“Leo Yong” with Edward Applewhaite, 423 Observatory Street, circa 1903–04
Shawn Lamb Archives at Touchstones Nelson Museum.
Who is this man? He is young, wears traditional and very simple Chinese clothing, his hair is still kept as in his homeland—shaved close on top, long at the back. He wears dark pants, white socks and black “slippers.” Sunlight reflects off his face, his expression is muted, he is handsome, neatly dressed, his clothing appearing bright and freshly pressed. He is holding the hand of a young boy sporting an extremely rumpled matching blouse and shorts. There is a flower pinned to the front of the boy’s shirt, it looks like a poppy. What year is this? The boy looks happy, his right leg is angled back and his bare foot rests a step above the left, planted firmly, the leg is rigid and straight. The boy appears to be leaning towards this man, who looks to be leaning ever so slightly away. How long has he been here, at this house, high up on the hill above the centre of Nelson? Is this the first day?

There is a second photograph, taken on the same steps, the same day, moments later. There is a woman hovering over the boy. She’s wearing a long skirt and a high-necked ruffled blouse, wire rimmed spectacles (pince-nez), the tip of a polished shoe protrudes from beneath the hem of her skirt that trails behind her and onto the porch. Her hands, so subtly reaching forward, hold without touching the boy, her son, keeping him in place, separated from this
man. The boy’s expression is now pained, he still holds this man’s hand but now the space between them has widened. Nothing has changed about the pose or composure of this man. Where has he come from?

The woman is Evelyn N. Applewhaite (born England, 1875 - died Nelson, 1943), she was married to Edward “Teddy” Hays Hind Applewhaite (born England, 1862 – died Nelson, 1950). They had a daughter and two sons, the oldest was Edward Turney Applewhaite (born Nelson, 1898 – died Prince Rupert, 1964). The Applewhaites came from England to the Kootenays to invest in the Silver King/Hall Mine. “Teddy” opened the first bank in the town, then got into real estate and insurance, and started Kootenay Electric Construction. The Masonic Hall now stands where the timber framed Applewhaite Block once stood downtown. Evelyn, younger and taller than her amply moustached husband, busied herself with three children, a large house and garden, community/church work. She loved sporting activities (particular on the lake). The couple were central figures in the Anglican St. Saviour Pro-Cathedral in Nelson.

Chinese “house-boy” and Applewhaites, circa 1900.

Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often hired as domestic servants for pioneer families like the Applewhaites, who came to Nelson in the 1890s. This photo taken outside the Applewhaite home at 423 Observatory Street shows Evelyn and Teddy Applewhaite with the Chinese “house-boy,” who is not mentioned by name.

Shawn Lamb Archives at Touchstones Nelson Museum.
and then at St. Andrew’s-by-the-Lake at Willow Point, where they relocated in 1910 to establish a farm with, appropriately, apple orchards.

The Applewhaite’s were movers and shakers, extremely present in the early development of Nelson and at the core of its distinctly British/Christian leadership, all while another community, with deeper roots here, were struggling to define their place, having already constructed numerous buildings downtown. Edward was secretary at the meeting where it was decided to incorporate the city in 1897. A year later, the city council voted to remove the Chinese community from their all too prominent location. Charles Hillyer, F. Teetzel, Mayor J.J. Malone, Mayor John Houston, J.A. Gilker, E.P. Whalley, Thomas Madden, these are the six men who voted to move Chinatown. There is a prominent monument to Mayor Houston downtown, if you stand facing it you can see where Chinatown once stood further down the block.

The Sinixt were here long before, and were still present as all the above unfolded. The Applewhaites would have witnessed them struggling to survive all the changes happening on their land, while these settlers were at their leisure—sailing, swimming, canoeing and fishing. The Sinixt would be declared “extinct” by the settlers in 1954, much to the surprise of those who remained, and still remain fighting for the land and rights. In 2016, the Canadian government argued that there was no Sinixt First Nation. As in many communities across Canada, representations of local Indigenous people feature prominently in Nelson’s identity, although the people themselves do not.
Edward (junior) is the boy in the photographs, squirming in his rumpled sailor outfit, born the same year Chinatown was forced to relocate, down on to Lake Street where the Red Light District would also be banished. He will join the Kootenay Rifles then the Forestry Corps in the First World War. In 1930, he married the widow Dorothy Edna Thompson (born 1882–died 1968 in Prince Rupert). He will become a lawyer and will work in the insurance business, and will serve as an MP for Prince Rupert from 1949–57. He travelled to Japan in 1952. But what was this man’s name?

I could go further down this Applewhaite “rabbit hole,” amassing significant dates and details, or finding amusing tidbits from these lives such as this anecdote concerning a Nelson canoe regatta: “Among the minor events was the ladies’ doubles in which Mrs. Heathcote and Mrs. Applethwaite(sic) defeated the Misses Gurd after an exciting race.”

1 Nelson Daily Miner, September 15, 1901

View of Chinatown

Nelson’s Chinatown originated in the early 1890s at the height of the mining boom in the Kootenays. In 1898 the city council forced Chinese residents of Vernon Street, where Nelson’s Chinatown began, one street lower onto the less desirable Lake Street. In 1901 it was reported that Nelson’s Chinatown had 277 citizens, making it the largest Chinatown in Interior BC.

Shawn Lamb Archives at Touchstones Nelson Museum.
nothing of his personal genealogy, nor specific facts about his life, before or after he stood on those porch steps with little Edward and his mother. Nothing is written down, and he is simply referred to as the Chinese House Boy in the archives. So we'll have to work out of things common to the experiences of the early Chinese migrants, and we'll need to employ oral histories, as well as non-academic methodologies, to find meaning in the ground beneath our feet. This is not a local story, it is a Canadian story, echoed in many communities, with global resonance. Like all things Gu Xiong has pointed me to—the local pulses out across expanding geographies.

The Applewhaite house stands at 423 Observatory Street. It is hard to determine which side is the front as it seems to turn its back on Observatory and Ward. The wide veranda on the west side overlooks a yard and gardens, commands glorious sunset views, and appears to be the most “welcoming” approach. The photos featuring the Chinese House Boy were taken at the northwest corner, where steps lead off the veranda and down into the garden and toward a shed and short driveway that connects to the alley. Gravelled and narrow, these back ways are common. The house is far up on the mountain side, overlooking the long narrow lake and the town site below, the view of former industrial/commercial buildings, warehouses and the CPR line that runs through is partially blocked by tall trees today. Edward looks to be 4–5 years old, so the photos were taken circa 1903. The view would have been more open then as the many introduced trees would have still been getting established. The view was clearer, you could see that original Chinese buildings being repurposed. The new
Chinatown was barely visible. *How often did he go down there?*

The Applewhaites were Nelson elite, the site of their home amongst other affluent neighbours, reflecting their privileged status. They invested here, and this mattered far more than the labour and resources the Chinese brought to build the foundations young Edward’s generation will inherit. I look back at the photograph, the space between the privileged Applewhaites and the *Chinese House Boy* is widening, the boundaries hardening. Look at Evelyn’s hand gesture, the left holding a cluster of flowers, clearly delineating boundaries. *For how long was he constrained here?*

The Chinese lost the privilege they’d earned, to exist predominantly on the main street, and they were restricted in how they could exist here—launderers, cooks, house servants—fundamentally domestic work, cooking and washing, cleaning up after and caring for the likes of the Applewhaites, as well as all the white settlers who came to Nelson. The Chinese will cultivate market gardens to feed the town. Meanwhile, Evelyn and “Teddy” have their own home, business investments, political status, and now a *Chinese House Boy*. I have come to understand the two photos as the first day they all met, young Edward’s initial childish enthusiasm for his new acquaintance being curbed, Evelyn is sternly establishing the conditions of the relationship, everyone needs to know their place. *How did young Edward remember this man?*

We are heading up the steep rise of Ward Street, Gu Xiong and I, climbing another mountain together, heading to the Applewhaites house. Over the twenty-four years we’ve known each other, we have ascended many
“mountains”, in Vancouver (where we met in 1995), Hamilton (where I was born) and Chongqing (where he was born), to name just a few, and wandered landscapes shaped by winding rivers. We have created exhibitions in many places and walked the streets of numerous Chinatowns across Canada, some still vibrant, others mostly erased. We have sat together with his family, Ge Ni and Yu Gu (his wife and daughter), most recently at a cafe in Los Angeles where Yu Gu now lives. She has become a critically-acclaimed documentary film-maker. Back in the late 1990s, I presented Yu Gu and Gu Xiong’s multi-media performance *A Girl from China* in Kamloops and, in 2017, included their work documenting Jamaican migrant farmworkers’ experiences in the Niagara region of Ontario in a major exhibition in Toronto. We’ve travelled to China together, and I have written about Gu Xiong many times, and every time is different as he keeps expanding the scope, is always revealing new connections, pointing at histories and lives that need revealing, like that of the *Chinese House Boy*.

We are standing by the house. “He would have been Cantonese,” Gu Xiong offers, “probably from Taishan, Guangdong Province. I think *this man* in the photo is very young, less than eighteen and likely came alone. That would have been very hard—no family.” Taishan often refers to itself as *the first home of the Overseas Chinese*; the first great wave of Chinese migration flowed from that region, situated on the flat lands of the Pearl River Delta. Gu Xiong tells me it is where revolution and rebellion most often surfaced in China; “Taishan can mean a stage at the base of the mountain, the place where you step up from.” Gu Xiong came
from the mountain city of Chongqing and as a teenager he spent four years in a rural mountain village during Mao’s *Cultural Revolution*. He travelled back from there to Chongqing, then many years later to Vancouver via Banff, traversing his own personal mountain range. The *Chinese House Boy* came from the base of the mountains in Taishan to the lowest steps of Nelson.

Histories that linger on the margins, paths of migration, hierarchies of citizenship, the precariousness of borders, the fragility of family and home—these are the themes that haunt Gu Xiong’s work. Having left his home in Chongqing, at the confluence of the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers in China’s industrial heartland, he has progressed from a dishwasher at UBC to full professor. He has been prolific and deeply engaged with examining the history of Chinese migration and settlement and has returned to China to explore its transformation in dialogue with capitalism and the *West*. He has, further, extended his creative investigations to consider the conditions of those who labour on the margins, denied citizenship or relegated to less-privileged positions in society. He is consistently drawn into dialogue with those who must struggle to give voice to their presence, and who risk their presence here by doing so.

“He would have lived in the house, separate from the family,” Gu Xiong says, “the children could ring a bell to call him.” We have just entered the Nelson Cemetery and descended a steep hill leading to the very bottom corner, past the section marked *Indigent*, to the *Chinese* section. Beautifully maintained, the cemetery was carved out of the forest in 1898, high up on the mountainside facing west to the setting sun. The Chinese section doesn’t receive sunlight or offer a view of the sunset, only the graves
higher up have these privileges. “There are few early graves in this section possibly because it was customary to return the bones of the deceased to China for burial beside those of their ancestors,” claims the brochure produced by local architects for the city (2011). This is highly unlikely, few could have afforded such a gesture. The authors then go to great effort to justify the lowly positioning of the Chinese graves; “Although semi-isolated in the north-west corner of the cemetery, it is not known if this location was selected using the 3,500-year-old practice of Feng Shui that is based on physical and metaphysical chi (qi).” This is absurd, the cemetery was laid out in the same year the city council ordered the relocation of Chinatown.

“This is not good Feng Shui!” Gu Xiong blurts, laughing, incredulous, then points to the graves high up that are reserved for the Anglicans; “That is good Feng Shui!” We climb to the high ground, through the Old Anglican section and find the Applewhaites. We take in the view, watching the sun begin to set, the ground around us is bathed in dappled sunlight and the shadows of flickering leaves, while the Chinese area slips deeper into dark shadow. “I want to know his name,” I say, “he can’t just be the Chinese House Boy.” “We can ask Evelyn,” Gu Xiong replies, closing his eyes, his head bowed, as he stands before the Applewhaites headstone. He is momentarily silent, then looks up. “OK, I have asked her. We will have to wait. Perhaps she’ll come to one of us in a dream.”

Typical for the artist, The Unknown Remains is a deeply poetic title that has a double meaning. Gu Xiong offers up the remains (as a noun—the descendants, memories, objects,
imagery, landscapes that shaped this place) that often linger unseen, incomprehensible or unacknowledged, and the present is poorer for this absence. As well, he employs remains (as a verb—from the Latin remanere, meaning to stay), as presence, exhibiting things that linger to trouble the present. In the cemetery, we paid our respects to the Bing family—Soo Quan “Charlie” Bing (1882-1969), Yee Shee “Jessie” Bing (1900–88), William “Bill” Bing (1944–96) and George Bing (1929-2008). Grandfather Bing had a farm and market garden. The vehicle, with the words “C.Bing and Sons, R.R.1 Nelson, Fresh Fruit & Vegetables, Phone 714R1,” rests in the woods on the farm where Charlie’s granddaughter Kwala lives. Gu Xiong wanted to move the entire vehicle into the gallery, but settled for the door and a large photo mural. The Bings worked hard to feed this community, as have the Mahs.

The Mah’s KC Restaurant remains a fixture downtown. There were once only five restaurants in Nelson, four were Chinese, the other was at the Greyhound station. Until he passed away suddenly in early 2019, Cameron Mah managed the KC with his younger brother Russell. Cameron was the link to the older generations of Chinese, many “bachelor uncles” who couldn’t afford to bring their families to Canada (or were blocked from doing so by Canadian laws and legislation). “He was always helping them,” Russell told us, “taking them to appointments, cooking for them here.” It was clear that Cameron’s death was very fresh to his younger sibling, and it clearly touched Gu Xiong who had spoken on the phone.
with Cameron, but never met him in person. Standing by the new grave, temporarily marked with a green stick with “Mah, Cameron” quickly written out in white marker, Gu Xiong whispers: “They worked so hard, open all the time,” then he almost shouts the words, “We Never Close! No breaks, no holidays, working to feed this community.” I wonder if any of the Bings or Mahs knew the Chinese House Boy?

Why did the Canadian government insist on severely limiting Chinese immigration (under the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885 that imposed a heavy head tax, followed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923–1947, the effects of which lingered into the 1960s)? Why did almost every community in Canada burden these committed Canadians with a short list of employment options? Why did Nelson’s founders force established Chinese businesses off the main street? These questions aren’t hard to answer, such laws and restrictions have been applied to too many in this country, including
Indigenous people and all immigrants who were not first British or of European descent, and white. Such laws and restrictions have morphed and changed, yet they remain too often unknown to Canadian citizens who are oblivious to the struggles of Indigenous communities, migrant workers, new Canadians, and the working poor.

What also remains unknown to too many is their privilege; the privilege of being in a position to look down on others, to look away and to judge, set the rules and choose a path, unhindered, free of barriers but able to exclude, the privilege of whiteness. What Gu Xiong offers is an alternative privilege, to be: open, empathetic and generous; self-critically engaged and aware of where you stand; in dialogue with the many, while walking in landscapes burdened with hierarchies of memories.

For the exhibition, Gu Xiong built a ship of 1500 cartons; a ghost of all those massive container ships that crowd harbours across the globe. All those cartons spoke of the invisible many who labour to keep products flowing, feeding global consumption. Those labourers are kept at a distance, either working from afar, or as highly restricted migrants who must apply annually for permits and are denied citizenship. Near the ship, Gu Xiong positioned a line of portraits to put faces to the many who have laboured, and still labour; images representing a diversity of peoples Gu Xiong has researched, documented and collaborated with. The Chinese House Boy was at the centre. “Evelyn told me his name!” Gu Xiong exclaimed, “She appeared to me in a dream early this morning. She said, his name was Leo Yang, that’s what she said, Leo Yang!”
Smile

I smile when I don’t understand how much the people love me,
My smile is like an innocent baby.

I smile when they yell at me,
I don’t understand why they do this.

My smile is like a baby’s cry.

I smile when I serve people,
Sometimes it is the only way for me to communicate with others.

I smile to give warmth to people and hope they will love me.

I smile when people help me,
I understand how important it is to take my first step
and then walk independently.

I smile when I am tired,
I see what I have earned from the hard work I have done.

I smile when I can finally listen and speak.
The more I smile,
the more people treat me like a real person in the society.

I smile no matter how hard it is like the first step.
I smile to the past,
I smile to the present,
I smile to the future,
I smile to all.

Gu Xiyan
1996

The Unknown Remains, Installation Detail.
The Unknown Remains, Installation Detail.

Yellow Cargo
“A River of Migrations” | installation | 16 photos — 12”x16”/each
Gu Xiong | 2019
I’m viewing the downtown from the lookout in Gyro Park, from where an unknown photographer documented a parade in the Chahko Mika exhibition grounds in July of 1914, on the eve of the First World War. You can see Chinatown in the middle distance of the postcard (Sing Chong laundry, now Kootenay Co-op Radio, next to Gim Lun & Co. store, now a residence, Wo Kee general merchandise and employment agency, and another unidentified building—these latter two structures have since been erased by a parking lot). The Chinese Masonic Lodge is the only building that remains on Lake, it is now the Full Circle Family Health Centre.

Chahko Mika is a Chinook Pigeon phrase, a hybrid language that allowed the early multi-ethnic menagerie of people throughout the West to communicate. Had the city developed as a truly diverse community, then Chahko Mika (You Come) would have been an appropriate name. But instead, the city named itself after Admiral Nelson, the British hero of Trafalgar. Nelson, the “Queen City,” is literally wearing a crown—the bulbs on the illuminated sign by the hospital near Gyro Park are arranged in that shape. This bold symbol of the British monarchy sits atop a hierarchical social geography that is echoed in the cemetery. The businesses, churches, and distinct houses and gardens have colonized this place, the pine forests have been replaced with preferred deciduous specimens, the hillside is now home to a wide array of invasive species.

The Civic Centre replaced the Chahko Mika exhibition grounds, but a new mall has taken the Chahko Mika name. The stores are well stocked with products brought in from the container ships on the coast. Unique Chinese products were once shipped here (tiny pots of ginger, special teas and herbs, distinct pottery,
iron cookware, silk clothing and fabrics), now the items are generic (electronics, cotton and synthetic clothing, plastics, cars). Many of the fruits and vegetables available here, cultivated by distant migrant workers, are shipped in as well. Large salmon are gone, sturgeon are endangered, as power dams have blocked their journeys and life cycles along rivers and lakes from the distant sea.

In that postcard from 1914, the parade is ending, having come through the downtown, it is now circling the track. There is a high wooden fence of milled boards that separates the grounds from where a few figures can be discerned in front of Sing Chong laundry. Down on Lake Street, a lone figure is moving towards us. Today, on Hall between Vernon and Baker, there is a mural depicting the evolution of Nelson, Indigenous peoples are on the left (the “past”) and the imagery “progresses” through logging and mining, ending with the “arts.” There is no reference to the Chinese community, once the largest in the BC Interior.

Look again at the lone figure in the postcard moving towards us on Lake Street. The tall fence separates them from the celebrations on the exhibition grounds. Summer, 1914. Could this be Leo Yang? Was this man still here? Where did those steps on Observatory Street lead him? Unknown in the archives, this man Remains in our dreams. I’ve printed an image of Leo Yang, and now add him to the centre of the mural, positioned to look every passerby in the eye, a modest gesture, once again, following Gu Xiong’s lead.

—Andrew Hunter, Independent Writer/Curator, Hamilton, Ontario

Detail of postcard, Exhibition Grounds, Chahko Mika, Nelson, B.C., July 13–18, 1914

Shawn Lamb Archives at Touchstones Nelson Museum.
Cultural Revolution Sketchbooks | 1972–76 | Gu Xiong | detail
**Railway Spikes**  More than 17,000 Chinese people immigrated to Canada to work on the CPR railway. Due to the harsh conditions they faced, hundreds of Chinese Canadians working on the railway died from accidents, winter cold, illness and malnutrition. After this period, a head tax was imposed on Chinese immigration so many of the immigrants who remained in Canada could not be joined by their families.

**Chinese Medicine Bottles**  Small Chinese medicine bottles found at Chinese camps from Porcupine and Fishermen CPR construction. One larger medicine bottle from Kwong Laundry, with Chinese writing labeling the bottle as patent medicine.

**Inkpad**  This inkpad was found in the attic of King’s Restaurant located at 652 Baker Street in Nelson, BC. It was used by the Chee Kong Tong Society, also known as the Nelson Chinese Masonic Lodge. Shawn Lamb Archives at Touchstones Nelson Museum.

**Gong**  This gong was used in Chinatown for ceremonies and celebrations.

**Shoes for Bound Feet**  Shoes originally owned by Mrs. Kwong Wing Chong who had bound feet. She and her husband owned Kwong Wing Chong Chinese Merchandise, which was on Vernon Street in the 1890s at the time these shoes were worn. Foot-binding was a Chinese tradition that began in the 10th century, and rose in popularity as an ideal of female beauty. Foot-binding was very painful any women with bound feet could barely walk, and it has been theorized that the popularity of the practice served to keep women in the home to perform tasks like spinning, rather than bound feet being a display of luxury and idleness as is sometimes thought. Shawn Lamb Archives at Touchstones Nelson Museum.

**Calligraphy brush**  This calligraphy brush was used by the Chee Tong Kong Society, also known as the Chinese Masonic Lodge. Shawn Lamb Archives at Touchstones Nelson Museum.

**Apothecary scale**  This Chinese scale may have been used to weigh gold or opium.

**Chinese Cooking Pot**  Shawn Lamb Archives at Touchstones Nelson Museum.

**Figurine**  This Chinese figurine was believed to be used as a good luck charm for families wishing for a male child. Revelstoke Museum & Archive.
Chinese Restaurant light box

2 light boxes—37.5” x 49.5” / each

Gu Xiong | 2019
ENDURING THE ISOLATION 1995
charcoal on canvas | 5.5’ x 8’ | Gu Xiong

CHINESE MANDARIN
ORANGES 1995
charcoal on canvas | 3’ x 3’
Gu Xiong
I came to Canada to join my husband in 1990. I was so happy because my family could live together after many years of living apart.

I met my husband in a factory where we worked in China. One year later, he went to university in another city and left me alone for seven years. We only saw each other two or three times a year. All we could do was write to each other once a week. After I gave birth to my daughter, I returned to work and had to leave her with her grandmother for five years.

Vancouver is a beautiful city, but at first I felt that I did not live within it, that I was isolated from society. My life here was all about the basement. The only thing I could do all day was work and clean. These beautiful landscapes around me were out of my reach. I wanted to go back to China.

Later on, I went to school to learn English and other skills, and gather experiences from my job and my co-workers. More and more, I could understand English and build up my life until it was shining with hope.

— Ge Ni
KC Restaurant Menu  Menu from KC Restaurant, which was opened by Cameron Mah in 1970 and is still operating on Baker Street today. KC stands for “Kootenay Centre”.

Chungking Restaurant Menu  Menu from the Chungking Chop Suey House, which operated at 624 Front Street from around 1940–1959, serving the Chinese-Canadian cuisine known as “chop suey.”

Three Chinese Bowls  Small Chinese half-cups brought from China c. 1900 and used by the Kwong family. Revelstoke Museum & Archives.

Ginger Preserving Jar  Chinese ginger pot with braided handles and two lids. The lid reads “Fung Chun Canning Co. Cargo Ginger in Syrup”.

L.D. Cafe Serving Platter and Plate  A serving platter and plate used in the L.D. Cafe, a Chinese restaurant that is now Amanda’s restaurant on the North Shore.

Royal Cafe Menu  Menu from the Royal Café, a Chinese restaurant that operated at 504 Baker Street c. 1920s–1930s.

Chinese Bowl and Spoon  Chinese bowl and spoon brought from China c. 1900 and used by the Kwong family. Revelstoke Museum & Archive.

Standard Cafe receipt book  Receipt book from the Standard Café, a Chinese-owned restaurant that operated at 377 Baker Street circa late 1910s–late 1960s. It was owned and run by the Wong family.
Chinese Slippers  These shoes belonged to a Chinese “house-boy”. They were found in the crawl space of Mr. and Mrs. C. Hamilton’s home at 418 Hoover Street in Nelson.

Chinese Cooking Pot  | inkjet print  
43”x54”  | Gu Xiong  | 2019

Shawn Lamb Archives at Touchstones Nelson Museum.
Over 100 years ago, Chinese immigrants were only allowed to work in restaurants and laundries, as house servants or cooks, or as labourers at gardens and vegetable farms in Nelson. This bell was used to call a Chinese houseboy when the family children needed help. While the bell was kept, the name of the Chinese houseboy has not been remembered.

**Chinese Houseboy Bell** | inkjet print | 43”x54” | Gu Xiong | 2019
I am from Pearl River,
I am from Yangtze River,
I am from Rio Minho River,
I am from Rio Grande River,
I am from Fraser River,
I am from kootenay River;
many years on a journey,
the unknown still remains...

我来自珠江

我来自珠江，
我来自长江，
我来自里奥民和河，
我来自里奥格兰德河，
我来自弗雷泽河，
我来自库特尼河；
多年的旅程，
未知的存在仍然流淌 …

顾雄
2019年
Kwong Family
Revelstoke Museum & Archives – 1794

Wong Kwong came to Canada in 1899 and obtained work in Revelstoke as a labour contractor for the Canadian Pacific Railway. Wong was well-educated and fluent in both Cantonese and English, making him ideal to recruit Chinese labourers. In 1907, Wong Kwong brought his wife, Yee Von, from China. Yee Von’s feet had been bound as a child, making it difficult for her to walk. The family built a house on Fifth Street East, and established the Kwong Lee Laundry. Mr. and Mrs. Kwong had ten children, six girls and four boys. As many immigrant families thrived in this land, the Kwong family of Revelstoke exemplifies their pioneer spirit.
Old Chinatown Map — Fire Insurance map of Nelson Chinatown | inkjet print | 34”x54” | Gu Xiong | 2019

Shawn Lamb Archives at Touchstones Nelson Museum.

While doing the research on Chinese Immigration history in Nelson, I saw this old map which is The City of Nelson Fire Insurance Map, dated May 1959. It shows the history of Nelson Chinatown on Lake street up to 1950s. The first Chinatown was built on Vernon Street in 1892, and in 1898 it was ordered by the city to move to a lower area on Lake Street, so that the residents would be “comparatively isolated.” The Nelson region Chinese population peaked at about one thousand residents.
In the eyes of my parents, I am their source of hope. After a hard day’s work, they come home tired and grumpy. My dad sits down beside me and asks how my day was. I smile and say, “Fine.” That always brightens his face. My parents always tell me how much I mean to them and that I will be forever in their hearts. I feel so lucky. Whenever I look into their eyes, I see the eyes of hard-working and loving people who earned everything they own. My parents came here with nothing and eventually were rewarded for their efforts.

I came here when I was seven. I was frustrated because I couldn’t express what I wanted to say. But after some time I adapted to the atmosphere and became like any other kid my age. Now I’m in French immersion, learning a third language. I watch TV, listen to the radio, talk on the phone, and of course, do my homework every day. I lead a life similar to everyone else’s. I am a symbol of adaptation for my parents. I have put my roots into this land in order to reach the light around me.

– Gu Yu
GROWING UP 1995
charcoal on canvas | 5.5' x 8' | Gu Xiong
I could hear but I could not understand. I wanted to speak, but no voice came from my throat. I could see and I could feel, but I had no words. I had to repeat words over and over again. My tongue slowly moved in new and strange ways, and my brain began to accept them. Making sentences was like giving birth: it was painful, but the joy came afterward.

Finally, I could say: “I am tired because I work so hard,” and “I am crying tears of joy because I feel I can speak out now.”

When I was a busboy at the university cafeteria, I collected tons of garbage in bags. Through my job, I was getting to know this new culture and its people. I was also learning about myself. In China, I was a teacher at a university, but at this university in Canada, I was a busboy. I felt I had lost something, but I had to accept this reality and turn it into something to help me stand up again. I picked up garbage every day, and I learned to accept myself in a different way. I slowly became closer to my inner self by working at this modest job.
A Chinese ginger pot with bamboo braided handles and two lids, was imported from Hong Kong. The lid reads, “Fung Chun Canning Co. Cargo Ginger in Syrup.”

Ginger is very popular in China, every family uses it for cooking and also as a medicinal “ginger soup” to cure colds. The taste of ginger is a staple of Chinese Cuisine through generations. Chinese immigrant brought ginger to the world where they have settled down.
I am from Pearl River,
I am from Yangtze River,
I am from Rio Minho River,
I am from Rio Grande River,
I am from Fraser River,
I am from Kootenay River;
many years on a journey,
the unknown still remains...

Gu Xiong
2019

Chee Tong Kong Society Accounting Book
Inkjet print  |  34"x54"  |  Gu Xiong  |  2019

Shawn Lamb Archives at Touchstones Nelson Museum.

L.D. Cafe Plate Shawn Lamb Archives at Touchstones Nelson Museum.

Chee Tong Kong Society Stamp These stamps were used by the Chee Tong Kong Society, also known as the Chinese Masonic Lodge, which had its headquarters on Lake Street from the late 1910s until the early 1970s. The Chee Kong Tong society was an ancient Chinese order that became allied with the international order of Freemasons around 1660. Shawn Lamb Archives at Touchstones Nelson Museum.
This accounting book recorded Chee Tong Kong Society everyday detailed activities in a traditional way. The Chee Tong Kong Society also known as the Chinese Masonic Lodge, had its headquarters in Nelson on Lake Street from the late 1910s until the early 1970s. The Chee Tong Kong Society was an ancient Chinese order that became allied with the international order of Freemasons in Canada. As many business and political leaders in Canada were Freemasons, and Chinese immigrants aspired to be associated with such a professional organization.
During our first three years in Vancouver, we lived in a basement that was deep underground. It had two small windows that faced the concrete wall outside, which made us feel closed in. The rooms were dark and the ceiling so low that my head almost touched it. The people who lived upstairs were very noisy and constantly drunk. We were isolated there. Although Vancouver is a beautiful city, we could not enjoy it because life was so hard. My wife and I worked every day at low-paying jobs to support our family. The basement was our only landscape.

At that time, we were lost in the darkness of that basement. However, we knew that one day we would be able to grow out of it and catch the light. There, we would be able to attain true freedom.

Living there, I realized that when someone moves and becomes part of another culture, he or she must establish new roots in order to begin growing again. For me, the basement came to symbolize this transition, these new roots.

Now our life has changed; we have moved out of the basement. But we will always remember the time that we lived there. We were homesick and culture-shocked. Living in isolation, we moved between hope and hopelessness. It is one part of our life that will always be with us.

— Gu Xiong
THE BASEMENT, 1995
Charcoal on Canvas | 5.5' x 8' | Gu Xiong