

Discussion Guide: I Am Canada *Blood and Iron*

1. Heen came to Canada to work on the railway and help repay his grandfather's gambling debts. What more personal reasons might he have? What might some of his hopes be in this new land?

Answers could include "seeing the world," proving his worth to his father, moving from boy to man, gaining more independence. Discussion could also move to Heen's sense of family obligation and to the difficulty of trying to control his father's actions.

2. Many Chinese who stayed in Canada after the railway was completed settled in Vancouver's Chinatown. Why would this have been the case? Do such neighbourhoods still exist in your area, and how might they be the same or different today?

Answers could include ease of maintaining cultural traditions; being discriminated against in other neighbourhoods; differences in ease of communication and transportation.

3. Does Heen have the opportunity to experience Canadian culture? How does he perceive the "Red Beards" and the Native people he encounters? How might a newcomer who doesn't speak the language experience immigration to Canada today? In your parents' or grandparents' era?

Discussion will vary widely depending on whether people have always lived in the same place in Canada, have moved from town to town or to a different province, are recent immigrants, or their parents/grandparents were immigrants and they know old family stories about the difficulties of settling in.

4. Think about how the Chinese workers maintained a connection to family in China while being away from home a year or even much more. What might it have been like to be apart from family for so long? How did the workers try to compensate for this?

Discussion might focus on workers being able to communicate with family only through letters or via friends returning to/from China. Discussion might turn to celebrating key events in the Chinese calendar such as Ching Ming, burial formalities and ceremonies, foods that would be eaten on special occasions. The men forming close clan associations could also come up, and the practice of calling non-blood relatives "uncle".

5. Heen soon realizes that the Chinese are treated differently than the white workers. Discuss some of the ways the railway company treated the Chinese.

Answers could include the different wage scales for Chinese and non-Chinese, having to buy goods at the company store at inflated prices, deducting pay for infractions. Students might have noticed that the Chinese were mostly given the job of clearing the trees and laying roadbed for the tracks, or clearing rubble after blasting, while non-Chinese workers usually did the laying of track, the blasting, and so on.

6. How might Heen have felt when he looked at his account for the year he has worked, and has so little money to show for it?

7. Which of the photographs or documents in the illustration section stands out for you? Why?