

## Why Study Cantonese?

**Especially when the majority of people, including your friends and relatives, are studying Mandarin?**

First of all, we are in the U.S. In the U.S., Cantonese has a 170 year history, based on when the first Chinese immigrants arrived from the Southern Kwantung Province. They were driven to the US, Canada and South America by the Opium War of 1840. The forced introduction of Opium into China by the British impoverished many of the southern Chinese communities, causing our ancestors to seek economic survival by taking passage on ships to the U.S. and Canada. These early Chinese immigrants who endured the three month passage across the Pacific Ocean spoke primarily Cantonese and Toisan. The discovery of gold in California in 1849 accelerated the emigration of Cantonese speakers to California. Most of the Chinese miners worked for mining companies extracting gold from the mountains. Their hard labor made California landowners rich. Most of the miners barely earned enough to pay their passage home to Southern China. They suffered discrimination from enforcement of the Foreign Miners Tax, directed at the Chinese. The name they gave to California, "Gum San," Golden Mountain, was a Cantonese term that remains in active use today.

Once the California bankers became rich from the mining, Charles Crocker and Leland Stanford began to invest in the transcontinental railroad. From the East, the Irish were hired to build the railway across the flat Plains west of the Mississippi River. The Chinese were hired to lay track across the Sierra and Rocky Mountains, because they had the experience with gunpowder and dynamite in blowing tunnels through mountains. From the Pacific Ocean to Promontory Point in Utah was the most difficult part of laying the transcontinental railway, yet the thousands of Cantonese speakers did it in record time enduring snow, rain, wild animals, and high elevations. The Irish laid track on flat land but were behind schedule. When the final spike was driven in at Promontory Point, the Chinese were denied passage on the railway they had built even though the bankers had promised them passage home. Many of them settled in the Rocky Mountain States and lived with Indian tribes. Some of their homes have been designated historical sites, because they belonged to the railroad builders from Southern China. They built Chinatowns wherever they settled and started their own Chinese newspapers. By the 1960s, some 28 Chinatowns existed throughout the U.S., including the one in Philadelphia. Those railroad workers who made it back to California eventually worked on reclaiming the land, turning dry desert land to fertile farmland. Today, when you eat grapes, oranges, peaches, avocados, and other fruits and vegetables from California, you should know that it was not possible without the Cantonese farmers from Southern China. The California fruits and vegetables come by way of the railroad, which changed the U.S. from just a fledgling country to a world power. The transcontinental railroad allowed the exchange of goods and people between the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean at a much faster pace than ships which had to travel around the southern tip of South America. The growth of the West Coast economy expanded the U.S. economy and government. Ho Chi Minh City, Singapore, Sydney, Manila, Bangkok, Toronto, and many more major cities, you will find Cantonese speakers, many of whom have been there for several generations. Even when you cannot speak the language of the country you visit, you will be able to communicate with the Chinese who have endured overwhelming odds to survive and pass on a remarkable legacy.

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