SHADES OF IMMIGRATION PAST: THE EXPERIENCE OF CHINESE IMMIGRANTS

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The triumph of the Chinese in Canada is not just in overcoming barriers — throughout history — that were put in front of them, but also in the significant contributions they have made, and continue to make, to Canadian society.

Despite having arrived on the West Coast in 1788 to build a trading post, the Chinese are still often viewed by the larger community as a collection of newcomers, and have been treated as "perpetual foreigners" from the country's inception.

In reality, the Chinese are not a monolithic group. They represent a potpourri of ethnicities and dialects; they encompass divergent social values, political views and creed beliefs; and they reflect virtually every region of the Chinese diaspora.

The one common thread that connects all Chinese in Canada, and indeed all immigrants to this country — irrespective of when they arrived or where they came from — is the legacy of the colonial history of Canada and its contemporary treatment of immigrants. The Chinese-Canadian community's history is as long and textured as that of their European counterparts. Thousands of Chinese joined the Cariboo Gold Rush in 1858, not only as miners but as entrepreneurs who operated restaurants and laundries, and who supplied fresh vegetables in and around Quesnel Forks and Barkerville, B.C.

In 1868, the Americans negotiated an immigration treaty with the Qing Dynasty for a pool of labourers to build U.S. rail systems. China, in turn, provided the Canadian Pacific Railway with a ready labour force to complete the western portion of the CPR. "Chinese muscle", more than 15,000 skilled workers, cut, dug and blasted their way through mountainous terrain from Alberta to B.C.

Meanwhile in Victoria and Vancouver, Chinese were embedded in every sector of the economy in their own businesses, as tailors, cigar/boot makers, farmers, domestic help, in cafés, restaurants and other food services.

But not all immigrants were treated equally, and there was a marked contrast between the experience of immigrants of European heritage — who were on a "preferred list" — and those of racialized people who had crossed the Pacific Ocean. The distinctions would grow to include immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa and Central and South America.

As soon as the last spike of the CPR was driven into the ground, Canadians demanded to expel the Chinese workers and to introduce a prohibitive tax on new arrivals. The Canadian government complied. *Chinese Immigration Acts* were introduced to curb Chinese immigration and to penalize those who were already here. The better-known restrictions are the so-called "head taxes" that imposed a series of levies on Chinese entering Canada, which rose from $50 in 1885 to $100 in 1901 to $500 in 1903. From the head taxes, some $23 million dollars filled government coffers. The levies were particularly insidious because the Chinese were the only group to be assessed this type of fee based specifically on race.

When even these measures did not stop the flow of Chinese immigration, the Canadian government enacted a series of Chinese exclusion acts that effectively barred all Chinese from entering Canada between 1923 and 1947. Meanwhile, Chinese in Canada saw many of their civil, economic and political rights either severely restricted or stripped completely, such as the right to vote, the right to work in certain key industries (most notably mining), and the right to enter various professions, including law.

The Chinese Immigration Act, 1923, often referred to as the *Exclusion Act*, was repealed in 1947, but restrictions on Chinese immigration, such as family reunification, continued into the 1950s. For 24 years, under an Order in Council, the only Chinese immigrants who were allowed to enter Canada were the spouse and under-aged, unmarried children of Canadian citizens and permanent residents. In order to circumvent this harsh and racist immigration rule, many Chinese immigrants came to Canada as "paper sons" — that is, men who claimed to be the sons of Canadian citizens or immigrants, either by buying the birth certificate of another person or circulating the same birth certificate among prospective immigrants. In total, about 11,000 Chinese paper sons came in during that era.

The Canadian government expected the community to die a slow death, but instead — even though one-quarter of the Chinese had left Canada — the families that remained flourished during the Exclusion era. Like their parents, the Canadian-born generation was denied the right to vote. Undeterred by being disenfranchised and proud of being Canadian, 500 young Chinese Canadians enlisted during the Second World War. They were soldiers whom Canada didn't want, yet they fought on behalf of Canada (albeit under British command.) At the end of the day, they won the right to vote. But day-to-day change would come slowly, and as it was for most racialized veterans, not even a uniform ensured service in white-only establishments.

This historical background, and the experiences of other racialized peoples, is necessary to understand the race-based context of Canada's immigration and refugee policies and of how past legislation and practices continue to impact racialized communities today. Despite our envious position as one of the most diverse nations in the world, the reality of Canada's immigration practices is in sharp contrast to how we are perceived externally.

Canada has come a long way since the first wave of Chinese immigration, but racism still plays a key role in framing Canadian immigration policy. Systemic barriers continue to pose significant challenges for Chinese Canadians and other persons of colour. For instance, recent research studies have confirmed the racialized poverty that exists in Ontario today — the destination of over 60 per cent of the country's newcomers. A United Way of Greater Toronto study, *Poverty by Postal Code*, sums up the situation best. Between 1981 and 2000, poverty rates among non-racialized communities in Toronto decreased by 28 per cent; over the same time period, poverty rates among racialized communities increased by 361 per cent. In the City of Toronto, Chinese families are twice as likely to live in poverty, as compared to their white counterparts.

Canada's workforce trends toward the non-recognition of foreign-acquired skills, and invalidated credentials contribute to the double whammy of being racialized and poor. Upon arrival in this country, many Chinese immigrants, like other racialized newcomers, find themselves confined to brown-collared ghettos — forced into low-pay, low-prestige service positions.

Modern restrictions on immigration in-take access points create racial barriers for economic-class immigrants as well as independent applicants. While many Canadians are uncomfortable talking about race, Canada's previous "preferred list" has been subsumed under another strategy based on seemingly innocuous business considerations. On a per capita basis, though, there are far more visa offices in Europe than in Asia, Africa and any other region of the world. Fewer resources mean more processing time in these non-preferred regions, even for those who are qualified. For instance, it would take up to four years for someone to apply as an independent immigrant from Beijing. An applicant with the same qualification could receive an immigration visa several months after he or she submits an application from, say, the Canadian Embassy in Germany. The unequal distribution of resources serves to control, if not quite deter, immigration from the under-served countries.

In 2012, the government moved from the "point system" to targeted sectors to attract immigrants with certain skill sets, notably language skills. In the same year, the federal Skilled Workers Program was eliminated and those who had applied before 2008 were summarily advised that their applications and fees would be returned. Some 280,000 people were affected by the decision. In 2014, the Canadian government eliminated both business-class and entrepreneur-class applications, which had been a boon to wealthy prospective Chinese immigrants.[1]

Without question, the most controversial of the systemic barriers is the one that faces family-class

1 Ibid, p.18

immigrants. The various restrictive *Chinese Immigration Acts* were intended to discourage Chinese families from settling in Canada. Family reunification then, as it is today, remains a category in which race and racialization — *still* — play a significant role in public discourse and policy narratives.

In 1978, "family reunification" was one of the core objectives of immigration legislation. The majority of the immigrants who came to Canada every year entered as family-class immigrants. Since the early 1990s, however, the percentage of family-class immigrants has steadily declined. Increasingly, our immigration selection policy is geared towards the skilled labourers and professionals who come in as independent class immigrants, as well as semi-skilled and unskilled workers who enter with temporary work permits. Since 2010, temporary workers have overtaken permanent residents as the main source of Canada's labour force.

As well, increasingly restrictive financial eligibility requirements effectively bar many low income Canadians from sponsoring their families from abroad. Conveniently, because members of racialized communities and recent immigrants are more likely to live in poverty, the financial eligibility requirement also has a disproportionately negative impact on these communities. Since immigrants from Asia and other parts of the Global South are most likely to apply through the family-class stream, and are also more likely than immigrants from European background to adopt an extended family structure, the reduction of the family-class quota and the restrictive definition of family-class membership have the added effect — intended or otherwise — of limiting the number of immigrants from these countries. Thus, the Canadian government manages to kill three birds with one stone with its redefined family-class immigration policy.

Many Canadians are proud of Canada's diversity. As a nation of immigrants, Canadians hail from all corners of the globe, reflecting every sector, all ethnicities, abilities, ages, classes, genders and creed beliefs.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2011, Chinese were the second largest "visible minority" group with over 1,324,700 or four per cent of the total population. While earlier generations came primarily from the southern province of Guangdong and later Hong Kong, today Chinese arrive from all parts Asia, the Caribbean, South America and South Africa. Canada may be their second, third or even fourth home.

Regardless of whether one is several generations Canadian or a newcomer, this collection of diverse communities has had a significant impact on Canadian society.

Canadians of Chinese heritage have and continue to play an integral role in shaping Canada and the results of those efforts are omnipresent. The earlier generation forged through and dismantled systemic barriers so that those who followed are now found in every facet of Canadian economic, social, cultural and political life. But this is not entirely a story of triumph, because the harsh reality of institutional inequities has left many racialized people, including those who are Chinese, struggling to survive. According to 2001 figures from Statistics Canada, more than 25 per cent of Canadian Chinese adults had a university degree, but they were also less likely to be employed.

Immigration, in spite of racist policies, has fundamentally changed the Canadian socio-economic and political landscape. Yet contemporary immigration policies are still prohibitive of immigration of racialized people. The irony in this case is that Chinese-Canadian communities have made inestimable contributions to the development of this society. Just think what Canada could have been had its immigration policies not been racist.