THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF CHINESE IMMIGRANTS TO CANADIAN SOCIETY

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Canada today exists as a globally connected, multicultural country, because of the contributions of Chinese immigrants. Throughout its history, it has been economically connected to China and these ties have built on the connection that immigrants from China bring. Once in Canada, these immigrants, like many other Canadians, fought for the right to participate in Canadian society on equal terms. It is because of these struggles that Canada today is a democratic country in which all of its citizens enjoy equal political rights.[1]

The presence of a Chinese population in Canada is not new; the relatively tiny Canadian-born population includes the children of recently arrived immigrants and people whose Chinese ancestors arrived in what is today Canada before the country existed. Indeed, today the second generation of Chinese Canadians is 150 years old (Won Alexander Cumyow, the first Canadian-born Chinese, was born in 1861).

This historical influx of Chinese immigrants includes individuals who have made outstanding contributions to Canada. Public life has been shaped by people such as the former governor general, the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, and the renowned philanthropist and former Lieuten-

1 Key works on the histories of the Chinese in Canada remain, 李东海 or David T.H. Lee (Lee T'ung-hai), 加拿大華僑史 [A History of the Overseas Chinese in Canada] (台北 [Taibei]: 中華大典編印會, 民國56 [1967]); Edgar Wickberg, ed., *From China to Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982); Peter S. Li, The Chinese in Canada (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998). For recent work, see also Lisa Rose Mar, *Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada's Exclusion Era*, 1885-1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Timothy J. Stanley, *Contesting White Supremacy: School Segregation, Anti-racism and the Making of Chinese Canadians* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011); Alison Marshall, *Cultivating Connections: The Making of Chinese Prairie Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).

ant Governor of British Columbia, the Honourable David See-Chai Lam. Since the late 19th century, when the federal government exempted merchants from the head tax so as to not to interfere with China trade, Chinese immigrants have had a huge influence of Canada's international trade, bringing billions of dollars into the Canadian economy. The Vancouver merchant Yip Sang, for example, was the chief agent for the Canadian Pacific Railway and its steamship line, enabling the company to operate on both sides of the Pacific.[2] Like those from many other groups, immigrants from China have literally built the country with their blood, their sweat and far too often with their tears. They have transformed the foods Canadians eat, the products we use and our connections to the world.

Connections to China have shaped much of Canadian history. It was China that the people who arrived from Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries were looking for. This misguided quest among European explorers continued well into the 19th century, as the ill-fated Franklin expedition shows. China had been the stuff of European dreams for centuries. The semi-mythical Cathay was the subject of the first book published in European vernacular languages, Marco Polo's *Travels*. To the 18th century French philosopher, Voltaire, China was the model for his ideal of enlightened despotism.[3] In the mid-1800s, European navigators were still trying to find the Northwest Passage to China. Because trade with China (and through Canada between China and Europe) was essential to making the CPR economically viable, the federal government was careful not to interfere with the China trade when creating its racist restrictions against the Chinese during the 1880s.[4] Even today, political leaders looking to lessen Canadians' dependence on trade with the United States, invariably end up looking to China as the next important place to be.

After English and French, the languages that Canadians today speak most frequently are Chinese ones.[5] Although Chinese is often viewed as a "foreign language," people have been speaking dialects of Cantonese and Hakka in what is now Canada continuously since the 1858 Fraser River Gold Rush. Indeed Chinese speakers arrived in many parts of British Columbia at the same moment that English speakers arrived — and in some parts before speakers of European languages.

The first Chinese reached B.C. in 1788, when fifty Chinese carpenters and shipwrights from Canton were brought to Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island by the English sea captain and fur trader, John

2 TIMOTHY J. STANLEY, "YIP SANG ((*Ye Sheng* in Mandarin), also known as Yip Chun Tien (Ye Chuntian) and Yip Lin Sang (Ye Lin," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 15, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed January 22, 2017, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/yip_sang_15E.html.

3 JONATHAN D. SPENCE, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).

4 TIMOTHY J. STANLEY, "John A. Macdonald, "the Chinese" and Racist State Formation in Canada," *Journal of Critical Race Inquiry*, 3,1 (2016): 6-34.

5 This is based on the 2011 Household Survey, which is notoriously inaccurate and if anything underreports the population. One arrives at slightly different figures if one considers Chinese as an ethnic or racial origin (visible minority in census terms) or by language. Chinese languages include Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka, Taiwanese, Fujienese and Tibetan languages, as well as "Chinese n.o.s." or "Chinese no other specified." See Tamara Hudon, *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report – Visible Minority Women* (Statistics Canada, 1916), http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14315-eng.htm. See also, Statistics Canada, *Census of Canada: Topic-based Tabulations,* http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/dp-pd/tbt-tt/Index-eng.cfm.

Meares, on his second voyage to the area. Meares was seeking sea otter pelts, furs that Captain Cook's men had earlier discovered were much valued in China. The triangle trade between England or New England, the Pacific Northwest, and China that Meares and his contemporaries developed is what first brought Europeans to the Pacific Northwest of North America. These Chinese workers built a fur trading post at Nootka Sound and a trading vessel, the sloop *Northwest America*. When the Spanish drove Meares' vessels out of the area the following year, the Chinese workers were stranded in Nootka Sound, becoming the first permanent resettlers (i.e., immigrants) to the northwest coast.[6] However, Meares' trading post established the British claim to Vancouver Island and the Pacific Northwest over that of the Spanish. In effect, Canada has a west coast today because of these Chinese "immigrants."

People who come to Canada from other parts of the world often show that it is possible to do things differently; so, too, immigrants from China showed that it is possible to enter the territories of Indigenous Peoples without colonizing them. Immigrants from China repeatedly showed that it was possible to establish relations with Indigenous Peoples that were respectful and mutually beneficial. During the 1858 Fraser gold rush, the Nlaka'pamux of the Fraser canyon blocked European miners from entering their territory until Governor James Douglas negotiated a treaty. However, they allowed Chinese miners to pass. The difference was that the Chinese miners asked their permission, rather than assuming that they could just occupy the land. There is significant evidence to suggest that these respectful relations continued in later years. By 1901, one-sixth of the Chinese men who were living in conjugal relationships in Canada had First Nations women as their partners. Many Musqueum, the Indigenous People of Vancouver, have Chinese ancestors.[7] Through much of the 20th century, Indigenous people and Chinese people in British Columbia — both denied the right to vote — worked together to create a draft resistance movement.[8]

By the mid-20th century, Chinese immigrants had spread across Canada and into Newfoundland. Every town of any size had its Chinese restaurants or Chinese laundries. Many prairie towns had Chinese-owned grocery stores. At a time when working-class Canadians could not afford much in the way of services, Chinese entrepreneurs were supplying their needs. In some of these communities, the Chinese workers lived lives of quiet desperation and loneliness, in many others they established full links to fellow citizens, building their lives together.[9]

But by far the most important contribution of Chinese immigrants to Canada was their struggle for full democratic rights. People often say that the Chinese get to be Canadian because they built the

6 GEORGE I. QUIMBY, "Culture Contact on the Northwest Coast, 1785-1795," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 50, 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1948): 247-255

7 JEAN BARMAN, "Beyond Chinatown: Chinese Men and Indigenous Women in Early British Columbia." *BC Studies*, no. 177 (2013): 39-47,50-64,225.

8 MAR, *Brokering Belonging*, 126-130.

9 See ESP. MARSHALL, *Cultivating Connections*. See also BAN SENG HOE, *Enduring Hardship: The Chinese Laundry in Canada* (Gatineau, Québec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2003).

railway. In fact, the Chinese workers who toiled on the CPR were professional railway builders who left the country once the project was finished. Very few of the Chinese in Canada can trace their roots back to the railway builders.[10] However, from their inception in Canada, Chinese immigrants fought for their rights to participate fully and equally in Canadian society. This included building self-defence and mutual-aid organizations starting in the 1860s, leading to the Chinese Benevolent Associations and community associations of today. By the 1900s, Chinese immigrants were forming political movements that eventually fed into the Chinese nationalist movement that has remade China as the world's second largest economy and a global player in its own right. Through court cases, boycotts, and eventually through their sacrifices as people who fought for a country that did not give them rights, the Chinese in Canada eventually won the unrestricted right to vote in 1947. The Chinese Canadian struggle for justice continued into the beginnings of this century in the redress movement on the Chinese head tax.

Despite these contributions, there are recurring panics in Canada today that the Chinese who come to Canada threaten "Canadian" ways of life (by driving up housing prices in metro Vancouver, for example) or that Chinese immigrants do not share "Canadian values."[11] People express these views despite the fact that people from China enabled the creation of the very communities such critics claim are threatened.[12] The Chinese roots of people and things Canadian are well worth remembering if we wish to maintain Canada as a democratic and multicultural country.

10 TIMOTHY J. STANLEY, "Playing with 'Nitro': The racialization of Chinese Canadians in public memory," in Peter Hodgins and Nicole Neatby (Eds.), *Settling and unsettling memories: Essays in Canadian public history*. 215-234 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

11 See, for example, KATHARYNE MITCHELL. "Education for Democratic Citizenship: Transnationalism, Multiculturalism, and the Limits of Liberalism." *Harvard Educational Review* 71, 1 (2001): 51-78.

12 Richmond, BC only exists today because Chinese immigrant workers built the dykes that keep the sea out of the area. Despite this, Chinese immigrants are blamed for destroying the city: see, JOHN LAW and FAN JUN, "The Destruction of Richmond, British Columbia, through Chinese Migration," Council of European Canadians, http://www.eurocanadian.ca/2015/08/destruction-of-richmond-british-columbia-through-chinese-migration.html (accessed January 22, 2016).