

# COMPARING THE CHINESE EXPERIENCE IN NORTH AMERICA

By Judy Lam Maxwell

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## INTRODUCTION

Much of the modern world has been astonished by China's recent economic growth. China's ascent to major power status has been swift, generating economic opportunities and attracting foreign business and investment. However, international admiration for China is relatively new. Back in the mid-1800s, when China was experiencing severe political, social, and economic turmoil, foreign powers took advantage of its ineffective Manchu dynasty, seizing territories and demanding concessions. The future of China looked bleak, triggering an exodus and millions of Chinese men left their troubled homeland in search of opportunities. They headed to *Gum San*, also known as Gold Mountain or land of opportunity. Lured to the New World, the Chinese were drawn to the gold rushes of California (1848) and British Columbia, Canada (1858); however, it was work on plantations that attracted them to Hawaii (1840s). No matter where they went, these sojourners were treated with the same disdain that foreigners showed toward China, and their lives were circumscribed by numerous forms of racial discrimination. That being said, their experiences in North America varied. This brief but informative article compares aspects of the Chinese pioneer experience — similarities and differences, struggles and achievements — in the United States mainland, Canada and Hawaii.

## SIMILARITIES, DIFFERENCES: EXCLUSION AND HEAD TAX

During the early years of the gold rush, there was little obvious discrimination against Chinese people, but as gold dwindled and competition intensified racial discrimination ensued. Gradually, more and more American and Canadian laws were implemented to confine the Asian newcomers geographically, socially and economically. Beginning in 1882, the U.S. Bureau of Immigration harshly enforced procedures at major ports of entry — such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco — to exclude the Chinese.<sup>1</sup> Many Chinese on the U.S. mainland fled to the Kingdom of Hawaii where they were exempt from discriminatory restrictions, as Hawaii was an independent country at the time. Canada also imposed anti-Chinese legislation, but it was in the form of an entry fee, or 'head tax', instead of Exclusion. Starting in 1885, this deterrent began at \$50 per person — whether man, woman or child — increased to \$100 in 1900,

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<sup>1</sup> San Francisco became the busiest port of entry for the Chinese, but Angel Island Immigration Station wasn't established until 1910.

then was later raised one final time to \$500 in 1903.<sup>2</sup> The Head Tax remained in effect until 1923 when Canada's parliament passed the Chinese Immigration Act, also known as Chinese Exclusion. Like the United States, Exclusion in Canada virtually halted legal Chinese immigration.

Immigration to and settlement in Hawaii shared similar elements to the mainland, but overall was considerably different. Plantations and warm weather — not gold — drew the Chinese to Hawaii in the 1800s. At the time, much of its economy was based on sugar and pineapple, and Hawaii was under the control of powerful American and European businessmen who owned most of these plantations. It was American businessmen that overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893, then in 1898 the islands were annexed as territories of the United States. When Hawaii came under U.S. jurisdiction, Exclusion came into affect but was not retroactive.

Chinese Exclusion marked the first time in both American and Canadian histories that an immigrant group was prohibited entry based on race and class. It also represented the first time that illegal immigration was defined as a criminal offense in both countries, and established the beginnings of border control. Nonetheless, Exclusion did not end Chinese immigration into North America as Nativist politicians had hoped it would. Although it severely limited entry, Exclusion had the unintended consequence of turning illegal immigration at the borders into a profitable and thriving business. And, worth noting, in a few places where racism was virulent — such as Washington State — riots and expulsion transpired. Racism was expressed in variety of forms, but evictions were the extreme and the exception.

## **STRUGGLES, ACHIEVEMENTS: CHINATOWNS & BEYOND**

After Chinese immigration was prohibited, many Chinese slipped into North America with immigration documents; however, entry was just the beginning of their struggles. In both countries, the Chinese were excluded from mainstream society and discriminatory legislation relegated them to Chinatown ghettos. The confines of Chinatown were created as a kind-of self-defense measure, a virtual self-governing haven of safety and security from the inhospitable host society. Legislation also barred them from certain occupations, resulting largely in low-paying, laboring jobs and a lonely, isolated existence in most of the U.S. and Canada. In addition, the majority were restricted to working in ethnic businesses — such as market gardening, restaurants and laundries — and within their own communities. Struggle was continuous.

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<sup>2</sup> At that time \$500 was equivalent to a standard residential lot. Between 1885 and 1923, an estimated \$23 millions in head tax was collected (worth over \$1 billion today). [Wickberg, E.B., ed. *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1982, p. 136.]

The pioneer Chinese history of Honolulu was quite unlike the mainland. During their five-year plantation contracts, White businessmen had control over their Chinese workers but when contracts ended in the late 1850s they could no longer regulate Chinese lives. The sizeable and more cordial native Hawaiian population became a social influence at this point. Unlike any society on the mainland, early Honolulu permitted the overseas Chinese options — such as land ownership and intermarriage — to move up the economic and social ladder. Initially received by Hawaiians as outsiders, the Chinese quickly became insiders through intermarriage. Intermarriage between Chinese men and Hawaiian women was also an important factor that led to easy acceptance by local native communities. With Hawaiian women as their spouses, Chinese men were able to obtain prime real estate and as early as 1866, only half of the Chinese population remained in Chinatown. By the late nineteenth-century, Honolulu's Chinatown was known among local Caucasians as the Native Quarter, since more Hawaiians lived there than Chinese. Few other Chinatowns of that era could boast such a multiethnic settlement as Hawaii's Chinatowns.

Very slowly, over the next sixty-plus-years, the perception of the Chinese evolved. One of the big influences was World War II. Although, anti-Japanese sentiment began well before the attack on Pearl Harbor, it was Japan's 1931 invasion of China, the 1932 annexation of Manchuria, and the 1937 Nanjing Massacre that triggered compounding condemnation against the Japanese worldwide. Japanese aggression in Asia combined with White sympathy for China's plight caused people to become pro-Chinese and anti-Japanese. Nonetheless, it was the unexpected attack on Pearl Harbor, as we know, that immediately galvanized the nations into action and, subsequently, all Japanese on the westcoast of the United States and Canada, and those in Hawaii<sup>3</sup>, were rounded-up and interned. Meanwhile, the reputation of the Chinese was enhanced by their active participation in the war effort, whether it was from record-breaking war bond purchases or their active service with the Allies. When Exclusion was repealed in the U.S. in 1943, Chinese born overseas who had served took advantage of their military service and became naturalized.<sup>4</sup> Since Canadian Citizenship didn't exist yet, Chinese from Canada — or British Subjects — joined the forces with the intent of demanding the franchise, which they garnered after the creation of the Canadian Citizenship Act in January 1947.<sup>5</sup> Chinese Exclusion was repealed in Canada in May of that same year. The recognition,

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<sup>3</sup> Internment in the U.S. lasted from 1942-1945 and from 1942-1949 in Canada. Although the Japanese made up one-third of those living in Hawaii — or approximately 157,000 — less than 2000 people were arrested or put into internment camps as it would have been impossible to transport that many people to the mainland and the Hawaiian economy would have collapsed without Japanese American workers. Internment in Hawaii lasted only a few months, at most.

<sup>4</sup> Chinese born in the United States prior to 1882 were granted citizenship, even those to immigrant Chinese parents. Those who were born outside of the U.S. could not acquire citizenship until the repeal of Chinese Exclusion in 1943.

<sup>5</sup> Canadian citizenship was created in January 1947 and the right for Chinese to vote in provincial elections was allowed sometime after. This qualified them to vote in federal elections, too. The next Municipal election was 1948, Provincial in 1949, and Federal in 1949.

acknowledgement and equality of Chinese post-war was a far cry from their mistreatment in the early years, in every part of the continent.

## CONCLUSION

Originally, the Chinese had no intention of settling permanently in the United States or Canada. Their intent was to sojourn: to work abroad, send remittances home, and subsequently return to China with enough money to ease the lives of their relatives. However, extended periods of separation from their families, financial restrictions, and racial discrimination eventually precipitated dramatic changes in their perceptions of self and home. The Chinese struggled for full equality until mainstream society re-evaluated their preconceptions and prejudices. This revelation ultimately resulted in the granting of full citizenship rights to Chinese in North America, and the revocation of discriminatory laws. To this day, Hawaii still leads North America with the highest percentage of Asians — over 42% — with Chinese comprising about 7% and multiethnic people amounting to over 40% of the Hawaiian population. And the growing Chinese population on the mainland has been embraced, with Vancouver hosting the largest Chinese population in Canada (30%), and San Francisco being the largest U.S. host (20%). Nowadays, the Chinese are respected: Chinatowns are recognized as heritage sites; the experiences of the Overseas Chinese have been collected and preserved for their historical value; and the Chinese and non-Chinese proudly enjoy and share the ethnic flavors of Chinese food and the heritage of Chinese New Year's celebrations. How times have changed.

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