



# Brokering Belonging

Chinese  
in Canada's  
Exclusion Era,  
1885–1945

Lisa Rose Mar

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## Brokering Belonging

*Dedicated to the memory of Edgar Wickberg*

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#### NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS AND TERMS

THIS BOOK RENDERS CHINESE NAMES according to their English spellings, with Mandarin romanization given when Chinese characters are available. Consequently, the transliteration of Cantonese terms reflects immigrants' idiosyncratic romanization from local subdialects. A Chinese character glossary for *Brokering Belonging* is available at the University of British Columbia Library Rare Books and Special Collections.

I refer to British Columbia's European population in a variety of ways that reflect Chinese Canadians' understanding. These terms describe a history of relations as most people perceived them, through a lens tinged with ideas about "race." British Columbia's mainstream population is most commonly called "Anglo," defined as Anglophone Europeans who belonged to the province's dominant British American power structure. I also use the terms "white" and "European" when they are most relevant to the context at hand.

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## **Brokering Belonging**



## Introduction

MIDDLEMEN ARE NEVER HEROES. EVERY immigrant community has middlemen because they serve an important function: they help immigrants deal with the larger society. Their work is often controversial. They may expect payment in loyalty, coin, tribute, or souls. Often, middlemen became immigrant communities' most visible public figures, but their profile in history does not match their prominence in life.<sup>1</sup> This book explores some of the most controversial political middlemen in the history of Canada and the United States: Chinese immigrant leaders during the Chinese Exclusion Era.<sup>2</sup> It also probes the mystery of why their past became obscured.

Between the 1880s and 1940s, Canada and the United States implemented policies that excluded and harassed Chinese immigrants. In the face of immigration exclusion, anti-Chinese laws, and mob violence,<sup>3</sup> Chinese sought political power to combat this discrimination. The Chinese Exclusion Act (1882–1943) barred the entry of all Chinese workers to the United States. Canada implemented a Chinese head tax (1885–1924) on entering Chinese workers, followed by the total exclusion of virtually all new Chinese immigrants (1923–1947).<sup>4</sup> In this setting, Chinese political middlemen improvised, creating unofficial ties to mainstream institutions. Their persistence heightened public unease about nonwhite immigrants, as many Canadians and Americans felt that Chinese political middlemen threatened democracy. Frequently, they saw the middlemen as exploiters of non-English-speaking Chinese workers, who treated the

workers more like “yellow slaves” than free men and women.<sup>5</sup> The popular media often depicted middlemen as despots who ruled Chinatowns rife with Oriental intrigue. The media also described them as mediators so alluring that few of their non-Chinese neighbors could resist their supposed corrupting influence.<sup>6</sup> Fearing Chinese political power, Canada and the United States denied nearly all Chinese the right to vote.<sup>7</sup>

Many ordinary Chinese saw the immigrant power brokers as complex figures. Chinese greatly respected individual leaders, regarding them as effective community representatives and as patrons, but they also criticized particular leaders as compromised collaborators with Anglo society, deeming them exploiters. Perhaps because of this complexity, some historians have described Chinese middlemen, but very few have explored the process of brokerage itself.<sup>8</sup>

*Brokering Belonging* traces the history of some Chinese brokers, individual ethnic leaders who acted as intermediaries between the Chinese and Anglo worlds of North America’s West Coast. Examining the work of these leaders in the brokerage relations between Chinese and Anglo institutions provides a new view of West Coast society. This book will reveal a process of making history from the middle, from neither a top-down nor a bottom-up perspective. Against the backdrop of a rapidly changing landscape of politics, law, and institutions in the early twentieth-century Pacific world, several generations of ethnic leaders aspired to claim power as the dominant representatives of their Chinese immigrant communities to Anglo institutions. Analysis of their work offers a new view of the boundaries between the Chinese and Anglo worlds and the political interactions between them. A unique but fragmentary body of Chinese-language documents has provided a record of the politics that sustained North America’s first illegal immigrant group.<sup>9</sup> Canada’s authorities could not read Chinese newspapers and letters without Chinese brokers’ help. Secure behind the language barrier, Exclusion Era Chinese created an alternative public sphere,<sup>10</sup> where they openly debated the politics of brokers, brokerage relations, and illegal immigration.

*Brokering Belonging*’s story has no heroes or villains but documents a restless struggle for power amid great change and instability. Chinese power brokers’ political world was competitive. They worked hard for the support of Chinese and Anglo constituents, who often had conflicting interests. If one failed, a more effective broker would take his or her place. The history of Chinese brokers reveals mainstream and minority politics as inextricably linked. First, the brokers’ story helps to reconfigure top-down histories of exclusion, which have focused on politics, the state, and the law. *Brokering Belonging* shows Chinese as more than excluded victims or resisting outsiders.<sup>11</sup>



Through brokers, Chinese immigrants actively joined in the central politics of their time: party machines and social reformers, labor and capital, immigration debates, and conflicts over a more interventionist state. Second, *Brokering Belonging* traces how brokers' negotiating power within both the Chinese and Anglo worlds often was rooted in Canadian, transpacific Chinese, and transnational North American ties. Third, *Brokering Belonging* explores transformations over time in brokerage. I eschew the common approach to immigrant leadership as the domination of naïve new arrivals by English-speaking merchants, labor contractors, interpreters, and professionals.<sup>12</sup> *Brokering Belonging* instead focuses on the changing political relations between ordinary people, their leaders, and their institutions in the Pacific world.<sup>13</sup>

The story begins in the nineteenth century with elite-oriented politics dominated by businesspeople. After the First World War, new charismatic leaders mobilized ordinary citizens to participate in mass politics, challenging both traditional brokers and the subordinate place of Chinese in Canadian race relations. These mass movements culminated during the Second World War, when Chinese protests for equality helped to transform brokerage relations, contributing to the Exclusion Era's postwar waning. Throughout, *Brokering Belonging* explores how Chinese immigrants who could not vote wielded considerable influence, successfully navigating a period of anti-Asian sentiment and exclusion at all levels of society. Community power brokers often succeeded in winning resources for the Chinese community. Consequently, they became significant players in race relations, influencing policies that affected all Canadians.

Chinese Canadians' situation was unique because they were Canada's first group of immigrants from Asia, having arrived during an era of "white Canada" policies. They were also one of Canada's largest visible minorities. As late as 1941, Canada's population was 98 percent European; the overwhelming majority was of British or French ancestry.<sup>14</sup> British Columbia, where most Chinese Canadians lived, differed. In 1885, only one third of the province's 49,459 people were European. Two-thirds were First Nations and Chinese. By 1945, ninety-two percent of British Columbians were European, but the province remained exceptionally diverse. Asians numbered five percent of the total 817,861 population, and Chinese were two percent. At the time, many Europeans saw Chinese as racial "others." In British Columbia, these political pressures forced Chinese into a separate, unequal status.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the story of Chinese brokers' work contributes a new perspective on the process of political integration. Most studies of foreign migrants' political integration focus on immigrants who could eventually become citizens.<sup>16</sup>