

The background of the cover features a large, expressive calligraphic stroke in a dark brown or black ink, set against a textured, olive-green background. The stroke is dynamic and fluid, resembling a traditional Chinese brush painting. On the far left, there is a vertical strip of deep red fabric with a subtle, swirling pattern.

# CHINESE

NOTICE

IN CANADA

PETER S. LI





# **The Chinese in Canada**

SECOND EDITION

**Peter S. Li**

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For Terence





## Preface

It has been ten years since *The Chinese in Canada* was first published by the Oxford University Press, in 1988. Since then, many changes have taken place in the Chinese-Canadian community, the most obvious of which is the surge in the Chinese-Canadian population, largely as a result of increased Chinese immigration in the 1980s and 1990s. By 1991 the Chinese-Canadian population had more than doubled since 1981, and quintupled since 1971.

There have been other conspicuous changes among Chinese-Canadians. By the late 1980s it had become clear that they were occupationally mobile, financially secure, and culturally cosmopolitan. The Chinese-Canadian community at the end of the twentieth century is very different from the one I wrote about in the early 1980s. In this edition I have tried to incorporate the many social and economic changes in the Chinese-Canadian community that have occurred in more recent times while retaining the historical analysis that provides a sense of community development and of the social forces that constrained it in the past. As in the first edition, I have tried to locate these changes not only within the Chinese-Canadian community itself, but also in the larger social and political context that shapes relations between the Chinese as a racial minority and the Canadian majority.

One theme that runs throughout this book has to do with the notion of the Chinese 'race' as it developed in Canadian society. The nineteenth century witnessed the social construction of an 'inferior' Chinese race, with the consequence that Chinese-Canadians were reduced to second-class citizens by the turn of the twentieth century. The image of Chinese-Canadians as members of a foreign race and the notion that their different cultural values and habits are incompatible with Canada's Occidental traditions have become entrenched in Canadian society. Such biases are part of Canada's history and culture, and they continue to affect the way Canadians view Chinese immigrants, despite the spectacular social mobility of Chinese-Canadians in recent years.

In addition to the questions posed in the first edition about why institutional racism developed against the Chinese and how they survived the era of exclusion, in this new edition I have raised new questions about the contradiction between the social mobility of Chinese-Canadians and the apparent increase in racial hostility towards them in metropolitan centres. I believe the answers to these questions lie in the social structures of Canadian society, which define the



parameters within which race and race relations are articulated. The rapid changes brought about by increased Chinese immigration to Canada in the 1980s and 1990s, and the way the changes have unfolded in urban centres, have further reinforced the importance of studying racial minorities as products of social relations in a societal context, and not as primordial cultural transplants.

Since the first edition was published, I have been encouraged by many favourable reviews and complimentary comments. The book was translated into Chinese and published in Hong Kong by Joint Publishing Co. in 1992. Some critics have raised questions about aspects of my argument; they are answered in the sections of the book where these issues arise.

In speaking to audiences across Canada on various topics concerning the Chinese in Canada, I am particularly gratified to hear occasional comments from Chinese-Canadian students who tell me that the book has changed their thinking about the past and aroused their interest to pursue further studies in this area. I have also been touched by several readers who have said that reading about what the early Chinese immigrants had to endure in Canada moved them to tears.

I started researching and writing about the Chinese in Canada in the 1970s; earlier I had studied the Chinese in the United States. In retrospect, I have to say that the intellectual atmosphere of ethnic studies in those days was not conducive to critical thinking. It was difficult to write about Chinese-Canadians, or for that matter about any racial or ethnic minority in Canada, outside a narrowly defined theoretical framework that focused on how ethnic immigrants' language and culture impeded their assimilation. In the case of the Chinese in Canada, most attention was directed towards how Chinese immigrants used an ancient traditional culture as the basis for the development of various culturally unique social organizations in the receiving society.

I have always criticized such a distorted view of ethnic studies. In my many writings, I have taken the theoretical position that one cannot fully understand a minority in the absence of the majority. In this sense, the majority and the minority are defined and produced by the relationships between them, not by their primordial cultures. This book describes the oppression, the survival, and the triumph of the Chinese in Canada. These experiences have taken place in a societal context, not a cultural vacuum. Hence it is just as important to understand the forces that generate the oppression and sustain the survival as it is to study the oppression and survival in themselves.

In the years since the publication of the first edition of this book, several important new studies have provided refreshing new materials and insights about Chinese-Canadians. In particular I have enjoyed and benefited from the works of Patricia Roy, Kay Anderson, and Constance Backhouse.

This revised edition has four parts. After a brief introductory section outlining the questions raised and clarifying the concepts used, the history of



Chinese immigration to Canada is presented in Part II. Focusing on why the Chinese came, how they were treated in Canadian society, and why a policy of racial exclusion was formulated against them, this section argues that institutional racism against the Chinese was a structural imperative, and that it had little to do with cultural misunderstanding or individual idiosyncrasies. Part III examines the impact of racism on the Chinese community, including the restriction of economic opportunities, the emergence of ethnic business, the disruption of conjugal life, and the delay of a second generation of Chinese-Canadians. The last section focuses on the many changes that the Chinese-Canadian community has experienced since the Second World War, from enfranchisement through various changes in Canada's immigration policy to the growth of the Chinese-Canadian population in recent years and the striking increase in the occupational mobility of Chinese-Canadians. In this section I have tried to locate the social forces that account for the social mobility of Chinese-Canadians, and to explain why, despite their occupational and financial success, segments of Canadian society have resisted accepting them as full-fledged Canadians.

For the first edition I chose the title *The Chinese in Canada* to stress that despite their recent occupational and educational mobility, Chinese-Canadians had not been fully accepted into Canadian society. In the course of research for this second edition, I became even more convinced that the image of Chinese or Chinese-Canadians as belonging to a foreign race is ingrained in the cultural fabric of Canada. For the most part, the Canadian public does not make a cultural distinction between 'Chinese in China' and 'Chinese-Canadians', and it maintains a differential approach towards 'Chinese-Canadians' and 'European Canadians'. It would take more than the entrenchment of individual rights and the announcement of a multiculturalism policy to change such cultural distortions and stereotypes. Until then, the title *The Chinese in Canada* will serve as a quiet reminder that Chinese-Canadians have yet to be fully accepted into Canadian society as legitimate Canadians with the same rights and entitlements as others.

A senior fellowship from the Canadian Ethnic Studies Program under the auspices of Canadian Heritage allowed me time off from teaching to complete the research and writing for this book, and I wish to thank Canadian Heritage for its support. Parts of Chapter 4 were adapted from a paper that first appeared in *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (1979), pp. 320–32, and Chapter 5 was based in part on a paper published in *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 12, no. 1 (1980), pp. 58–73. I am grateful to these journals for their permission to reprint this material.

Lori Wilkinson was the research assistant who provided invaluable help in locating materials, compiling statistical tables, checking references, and conducting other research tasks, and I appreciate very much her assistance in making my writing easier. I also wish to thank the many people in the Chinese-



Canadian community who answered my questions. In particular, I want to acknowledge Mr Tung Chan, the Vice-President of Asian Banking, Toronto Dominion Bank, and former Vancouver City councillor, for his candid views and helpful comments. Lilian To, Executive Director of the United Chinese Community Enrichment Services Society (SUCCESS), has also kindly shared with me on many occasions her insights into ethno-specific services and a wide variety of other issues. Colleagues too have been helpful in discussing ideas with me and reading draft manuscripts. Gurcharn Basran has been a supportive colleague and faithful friend who has read many of my papers in draft form, and I appreciate his sustained interest and support of my work. Singh Bolaria, with whom I have co-authored several works, continues to share with me his perceptive insight and witty humour about the question of 'race' in Canadian society. I alone am responsible for whatever errors and omissions remain in this book.

I also wish to thank Oxford University Press for publishing the first edition of the book, allowing a Chinese edition to be published, and supporting the publication of the second edition. It has been a pleasure to work with the Oxford staff, whose professionalism and commitment to scholarly publication always impress me. In particular, I wish to thank Euan White, the Acquisitions Editor, and Phyllis Wilson, the Managing Editor, for their support and help. Sally Livingston copy-edited the first edition of the book as well as the second edition; I appreciate very much her completing the job meticulously and expeditiously.

The Chinese character *hua* on the cover was painted by Mr Shu-Cheng Zheng, an artist and calligrapher. I thank him sincerely for his help. The word *hua* means brilliance, talent, and beauty in the Chinese language, and since in Chinese it is used to construct compound words such as 'Chinese' or 'Chinese-Canadian' it is an appropriate symbol for a book on the Chinese in Canada.

Terence, my son, was only four when the first edition of this book was published. Since then he has grown into an accomplished teenager, cheerful and full of self-confidence. I hope this second edition will provide him and Chinese-Canadians like him with a more complete record of their ancestral roots in Canada, their home country.





## Contents

Tables	ix
Preface	xi

### **I INTRODUCTION**

1	Thorny Questions and Conceptual Biases	3
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### **II THE DEVELOPMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL RACISM**

2	Chinese Emigration	15
3	Racism Against the Chinese	27

### **III THE CHINESE COMMUNITY IN THE EXCLUSION ERA**

4	Occupations and Ethnic Business	47
5	Marriage and the Family	61
6	Community Organizations and Social Life	77

### **IV THE EMERGENCE OF THE CHINESE COMMUNITY AFTER THE WAR**

7	Chinese Immigration to Canada	89
8	Contemporary Chinese-Canadians	103
9	Social Mobility and the Chinese Middle Class	119
10	Old Images and New Politics	141

Notes	157
References	169
Author Index	185
Subject Index	187





## Tables

Table 2.1	Stated Occupations of a Random Sample of Chinese Entering Canada, 1885–1903	24
Table 3.1	Total Revenues from Head Tax and Registrations for Leave of Chinese Immigrants, 1886–1943	42
Table 4.1	Wages of Chinese and White Labour by Selected Occupations in British Columbia, Canada, Around 1900	48
Table 4.2	Occupations of Chinese in British Columbia (1885), Victoria (1901) and Canada (1921, 1931)	52
Table 5.1	Age and Sex of Chinese Immigrants Admitted Annually to Canada, 1907–1924	66
Table 5.2	Sex Ratio and Nativity of Chinese in Canada, 1881–1991	67
Table 5.3	Marital Status by Sex for Chinese in Canada 15 Years of Age and Over, 1941–1991	71
Table 5.4	Estimated Numbers of Various Family Types Among Chinese in Canada, 1941–1971	72
Table 7.1	Chinese Immigrants Admitted to Canada, 1949–1955	96
Table 7.2	Age Composition of Chinese Immigrants Admitted to Canada, 1956–1994	97
Table 7.3	Immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China Admitted to Canada, 1968–1994	99
Table 7.4	Intended Occupation of Chinese Immigrants Destined for the Canadian Labour Force, 1954–1994	100
Table 8.1	Distribution of Chinese-Canadians by Province, 1971–1991	104
Table 8.2	Period of Immigration to Canada for Chinese-Canadians, 1971–1991	105
Table 8.3	Age Composition of Foreign-Born and Native-Born Chinese-Canadians, 1971–1991	106
Table 8.4	Mother Tongue and Language Most Often Spoken at Home, Chinese-Canadians, 1981–1991	108
Table 8.5	Ability to Speak Official Languages among Foreign-Born and Native-Born Chinese-Canadians, 1971–1991	109
Table 8.6	Types of Household for Chinese-Canadians and Other Canadians, 1981–1991	111



Table 8.7	Distribution of Chinese in Vancouver and Toronto, 1991	113
Table 9.1	Occupations of Chinese in the Employed Labour Force of Canada, 15 Years of Age and Over, 1971–1991	120
Table 9.2	Levels of Schooling for Foreign-Born and Native-Born Chinese-Canadians and Other Canadians, 15 Years of Age and Over, 1971–1991	122
Table 9.3	Occupations of Foreign-Born and Native-Born Chinese-Canadians and Other Canadians, 1971–1991	124
Table 9.4	Distribution of Self-employed Chinese-Canadians and Other Canadians by Industry, 1991	126
Table 9.5	Managerial, Professional, and Technical Occupations among Native-born and Foreign-born Chinese-Canadians, and Other Canadians, 1991	130
Table 9.6	Business Immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan Admitted to Canada, 1986–1996 (Principal Applicants Only)	133





PART I

# Introduction







# 1

## **Thorny Questions and Conceptual Biases**

When the 1991 Canadian census was taken, 633,933 persons, or about 2.4 per cent of Canada's population, claimed 'Chinese' as an origin (Statistics Canada, 1994).<sup>1</sup> About 46 per cent of them resided in Ontario and 31 per cent in British Columbia; Toronto and Vancouver accounted for 66 per cent of those of Chinese origin in Canada (*ibid.*). Until 1981, this group of Canadians represented no more than half of one per cent of the country's population, and possibly less. Since the 1970s the numbers of Chinese immigrants to Canada have increased, and their arrival has substantially increased the population of persons of Chinese origin—from 124,600 in 1971 to 285,800 in 1981 to well over 600,000 in 1991 (Statistics Canada, 1976a, 1984a, 1994a). Thus within twenty years the Chinese-Canadian population had increased five times. Without doubt, immigration in the 1970s and 1980s has played a major role in sustaining the growth of the Chinese community in Canada.

The image of the Chinese as recent additions to the Canadian mosaic is not incorrect: as many as 73 per cent of Chinese-Canadians in 1991 were born outside Canada, and 63 per cent of them immigrated only after 1970 (Statistics Canada, 1994). However, these statistics can be misleading, since they do not reveal the social and political reasons why so many current Chinese-Canadians remain foreign-born even though their predecessors first immigrated to British Columbia in 1858—nine years before the Canadian confederation was formed.

There are other discrepancies between statistical facts about Chinese-Canadians and sociological explanations of their position as a racial minority in Canada. Throughout most of their history in Canada, they made up less than one per cent of the country's population, and in the nineteenth century were concentrated mainly in British Columbia. Yet this numerically small racial minority became the object of anti-Orientalism throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth. Today it seems almost incomprehensible that people first brought to the country to alleviate labour shortages could have been seen as so threatening that municipal, provincial, and federal governments would pass extensive laws to restrict their rights and single them out for exclusion. The severity with which the question of Chinese people and Chinese immigration was treated in Canada was out of all proportion to any threat they could have posed.



In light of the harsh conditions that they endured in the past, the social mobility of Chinese-Canadians today, which first became evident in the 1980s, appears remarkable. The emergence of the Chinese middle class, the affluence of the Chinese consumer market, and the movement of Chinese-Canadians into professional, technical, and managerial occupations are only some indications of how far they have come from the Chinatown enclave and the second-class status to which they were once confined. Various explanations have been suggested to account for this spectacular social mobility, including the opportunities available in post-war Canada, transplanted Chinese values, and changes in immigration policies, which encouraged the migration of those with professional and technical skills.

Yet despite the occupational achievements and financial security of many Chinese-Canadians today, they are periodically singled out as causing racial tension and social stress in urban centres. Hence their residential concentration in established middle-class neighbourhoods, their superficial foreign appearance, the alleged incompatibility of their values with Canadian traditions, their linguistic profile, and their consumer patterns become the subject of public scrutiny. It would appear that it is not so much their cultural characteristics or urban concentration in themselves that are perceived as being at odds with Canada's Occidental traditions, but rather the fact that, historically and culturally, racial minorities such as the Chinese have always appeared foreign to white Canadians.

The simple facts raise many hard questions. Why were the Chinese legally discriminated against and denied the rights and opportunities that other groups enjoyed in Canada when their labour was instrumental in building many industries, especially in the west? Why was there a sex imbalance in the Chinese-Canadian community before the war, and why does a large proportion of the Chinese-Canadian community remain foreign-born after a history in Canada of 140 years? Why are Chinese-Canadians still regarded by some as members of a foreign race? Why, despite their social mobility, are they not fully accepted as genuine Canadians?

These are difficult questions, and they call for careful analyses of historical data and contemporary statistics, as well as sociological explanations. In the pages to follow, a wide range of material is used to show why institutional racism developed against the Chinese in the nineteenth century, how the Chinese-Canadian community survived the period of exclusion before 1947, and what demographic and social forces transformed it in the decades after the Second World War.

### **Finding a term for 'the Chinese'**

It is difficult to find a satisfactory term to refer to the Chinese minority in Canada without misrepresenting its members in some way. Ethnically, their



ancestral roots can be traced to China, although some left China a few generations ago and others migrated elsewhere before coming to Canada. It would be misleading to refer to them simply as 'Chinese', since there are some 1.2 billion people in mainland China who are known as Chinese, and another 30 million ethnic Chinese distributed in 134 countries outside mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Poston, Mao, and Yu, 1992). Culturally, it is difficult to justify treating all the people of China and the Chinese diaspora as one entity, since historical conditions and social realities have produced many cultural differences and linguistic variations among the Chinese around the world. Thus a semantic distinction must be maintained when referring to Chinese in China and Chinese in Canada, even though many of the Chinese in Canada originated, whether in their own generation or in their ancestral past, in China.

Many Chinese in Canada are Canadian citizens, either by birth or by naturalization. They participate in the same educational, political, and economic institutions as other Canadians, and they share with other Canadians the rights and entitlements of citizens or residents of Canada. Hence the term 'Chinese-Canadians' is appropriate to stress the fact that they are Canadians of ethnic Chinese origin. The term is not without problems, however. It suggests a class of what are sometimes referred to as 'hyphenated' or 'ethnic' Canadians, with the implication that the prefix indicates a status lower than that of unhyphenated Canadians. The sensitivity towards the term 'hyphenated Canadian' is well justified given the historical dominance of European culture and tradition in Canadian society and the tendency to view people of non-European origin and their cultures and traditions as foreign. In this book, the term 'Chinese-Canadians' is used to stress that fact that they are not foreigners in Canada but Canadians with a history that precedes Confederation and to distinguish them from Chinese in mainland China and in the Chinese diaspora around the world. The term 'Chinese in Canada' is used interchangeably with 'Chinese-Canadians', despite its subtle suggestion of an alienated status or a sense of marginalization among members of an Oriental minority in an Occidental country. Such alienation and marginalization have been part of the history of Chinese-Canadians, and the term 'Chinese in Canada' is a quiet reminder that the notion of the Chinese as belonging to a foreign race in Canada is part of the country's history and tradition.

## **A history reconsidered**

Aside from the indigenous people, no racial or ethnic group in Canada has experienced such harsh treatment as the Chinese. Anti-Chinese sentiments were widespread in British Columbia in the nineteenth century, and except for a few years after the arrival of the Chinese in 1858, the province's history was marred by a long-lasting anti-Chinese movement. Anti-Orientalism was common



among politicians, union leaders, white workers, and employers, even though all these groups benefited, directly or indirectly, from the presence of the Chinese. In this sense the Chinese in Canada, like those in the United States, were the 'indispensable enemy' (Saxton, 1971) of the state.

The same social and economic forces that had led many Europeans to settle in North America earlier in the nineteenth century also led many Chinese to immigrate during the latter half of the century. These waves of migration were propelled, on the one hand, by poverty at home and drawn, on the other, by opportunities abroad—a classic case of disparity between rich and poor nations. But unlike the European immigrants, who were generally accepted into Canadian society either as homesteaders on the prairies or as workers in the urban labour force, the Chinese were not considered a permanent feature of Canada. They were simply recruited as cheap labour to fill the shortage of white workers here. It was no accident that the Canadian government passed the first anti-Chinese bill in 1885, the same year the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway was completed. Earlier, the federal government had been so concerned about the shortage of labour in the west that it was unwilling to restrict Chinese immigration, despite requests from British Columbia. Between 1875 and 1923 British Columbia passed numerous bills to restrict the civil rights of the Chinese. Finally, in 1923 the federal government passed the Chinese Immigration Act, which prohibited Chinese from entering Canada for twenty-four years before it was repealed.

The Chinese gained the right to vote in the first few years after the Second World War. With the repeal of the Chinese Immigration Act in 1947, and subsequent changes in Canada's immigration policy, they were allowed to immigrate on a limited basis. The volume of immigration was small in the two decades after the war, as Canada maintained its traditional policy of favouring immigrants from Europe and the United States over those from the Third World. But with the changes in immigration policy introduced in 1967, a larger volume of Chinese immigrants began to enter Canada. Further policy changes that broadened the admission categories for business immigrants, together with the changing political situation in Hong Kong, triggered another wave of Chinese immigration to Canada in the 1980s. By 1994 over half a million Chinese were estimated to have immigrated to Canada after the Second World War, about 92 per cent of them after 1967.<sup>2</sup>

The experiences of the Chinese in Canada may be grouped in three distinct periods. During the exclusion era, from 1923 to 1947, no Chinese were allowed to immigrate to Canada, and those already here were denied many civil rights. The period before exclusion, between 1858 and 1923, had witnessed the emergence of institutional racism, which made the Chinese in Canada frequent targets of racial antagonism and attacks. The end of the Second World War marked a new epoch as the Chinese gained their civil rights and began to build a new