

Passage

to *Voices of Chinese Immigrant Women to Canada*


Promise
Land



VIVIENNE POY

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Voices of Chinese Immigrant Women to Canada

VIVIENNE POY

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*This book is dedicated to all
Chinese immigrant women in Canada*

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Preface

This volume might be described as a panorama of the twentieth century – on two sides of the world. Canada went through two world wars and developed from a narrowly Eurocentred semi-colonial outpost into a nation that embraced a multicultural identity and gained respect for its independent foreign policy and initiatives in peacekeeping. China went through those same world wars, followed by a Communist revolution in 1949 and thirty years of political movements that led to great suffering for many of its citizens. Following Deng Xiaoping's accession to power in 1978 and the decision to open up to "modernization, the world and the future," China's economic progress changed the face of the nation and its role in the world. The tiny outpost of Hong Kong on the South China coast, a British colony from 1842 to 1997 and a dynamic city, also changed dramatically over the twentieth century. Its role as a way station for refugees from China who found their way to Canada in the years after the Second World War, along with the special relationship it developed with Canada in the years leading up to its return to China in 1997, give it a prominent place in the unfolding story.

The focus on Chinese women who moved between China, Hong Kong, and Canada gives this story its unique character, providing unusual insights into the historical change process. Their lives were often caught up in restrictions imposed by China's patriarchal traditions and in disadvantages arising from discrimination and bias in Canadian immigration policy. Nevertheless, they exerted a remarkable degree of agency in the decisions they made and in their contributions to "Promise Land,"

the name given to their newly adopted country in the early years. The framework drawn from feminist analysis and understanding is introduced delicately, non-dogmatically, and in ways that shed new light on many well-known junctures in Canadian history.

In chapters 2 to 9 of this volume, we are treated to the vivid narratives of twenty-eight women who emigrated to Canada between 1950 and 1989 – years of political, economic, and social change in China, Hong Kong, and Canada. They tell the stories of their childhood in China or Hong Kong and the conditions that led to their immigration to Canada. This was largely a matter of family reunion or pre-arranged marriage in the early years; later, higher education became a main attraction, and ultimately it was the diverse professional and business opportunities that opened up. For most of these women, the opportunity to tell their stories was welcomed, and in some cases they felt it had been a healing and affirming experience. Follow-up interviews with many of them in 2010 has enabled us to observe their progress into the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1 provides a historical background that explains the highly discriminatory immigration policies that had barred entry to Chinese women, with a few exceptions, up to the late 1940s. The role of the early immigrants, including such outstanding activists and political organizers as Jean Lumb and Douglas Jung, in demanding equal citizenship rights and fair immigration policies, gradually led to a more equitable playing field. Finally, Hong Kong's prosperity and Canada's policies of encouraging an investor category of immigration created a situation that was favourable to Chinese immigrants, and the stories of professional women and business leaders coming in this later period are riveting. Sadly, it did not mean the end of discrimination, since new causes for social prejudice arose from an envy inspired by the educational and economic success of many Chinese Canadians. Chapter 10 ties all the threads of the stories together in a thoughtful analysis of the interconnected historical causes lying behind the dramatic changes that unfolded between the 1950s and the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Generally, this is an uplifting story, with compelling evidence of the greatly increased agency and possibility for Chinese women over the decades, and a remarkable degree of agreement among those interviewed that their lives had been transformed in positive ways by the opportunity to settle in Canada. By the same token, they have made re-

markable contributions to Canadian society as teachers, university administrators, artists, community organizer, and multinational businesswomen. All of this, of course, rested on their equally important roles as homemakers and as the heart and soul of Chinese Canadian communities. In some cases, Chinese women have excelled in important social and political leadership roles, reflecting the increasingly prominent role women have played in Hong Kong's social history.

Nevertheless, readers should not view this as a book narrowly focused on the experience of Chinese women. Rather, it is a breathtaking overview of Canadian history seen from the perspective of women immigrants who have contributed in important ways to that history. A rich array of historical sources, from scholarly texts to archival material, newspapers, and the records of parliamentary debates, have been drawn upon to give a critical account of changing immigration policies over more than a century. Given the importance of immigration in Canada's history and the composition of the Canadian population, it is also a book about Canadian identity. Insightful analysis is given into the interconnection between the reform of immigration policy and Canada's efforts to improve its international image in the 1960s. The slow unfolding of a policy of multiculturalism is also presented, beginning in the early 1970s and culminating in the passage of the Multiculturalism Act of 1988. There is further analysis of how Canada has navigated the difficult waters of globalization since the end of the Cold War in 1991 and how it has benefited from the input of a privileged and mobile international capitalist class of people.

Most of all, this is a very human book – connecting readers to successive generations of immigrants, their parents and grandparents, their children and grandchildren, their joys, anxieties, efforts, and achievements. It is a book that calls upon readers to interrogate themselves and reflect on where they have been over these years and how they have contributed to, or possibly resisted, the social transformations that are described. It is also a book that calls for much comparative reflection – across different time periods and among different groups of immigrants and citizens in Canada's cultural mosaic.

I would like to bring this preface to a close by sharing with readers a little about the remarkable author of this book. She came to Canada from Hong Kong for university studies in 1959, and thus her life experience has some parallels with the women whom she profiled in chapter

6. Subsequently she has had a highly distinguished career. Not satisfied with her university qualifications, she later studied in a community college and became a successful fashion designer. In 1998 she was appointed to the Senate of Canada, the first Asian woman to hold such a role, and in 2003 she was elected chancellor of the University of Toronto. Over these demanding years she also pursued a doctoral degree in history at the University of Toronto under the guidance of the renowned scholar of Chinese religion and philosophy, Professor Julia Ching. When Julia passed away in the autumn of 2001, I was privileged to take over as chair of her doctoral thesis committee and saw her through to a successful defence in July 2003.

She was thus conferred a doctoral degree in history and inaugurated as chancellor of the University of Toronto at one and the same graduation ceremony in November 2003. This was the celebration of a remarkable combination of dedicated scholarly effort and outstanding community leadership. Most recently, in May 2010, she was recognized as one of Canada's Top 25 Immigrants, a people's choice award based on a wide popular vote. The publication of this book stands as further testimony to her remarkable ability to combine academic scholarship with service to the community and nation. It is based on a large amount of documentary research and repeat interviews with many of her research subjects during the years since the defence of the doctoral thesis. It has built on the findings and analysis of the thesis in ways that enable the reader to engage with current and emerging issues of Canadian identity at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Professor Ruth Hayhoe
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Vivienne Poy



Official opening of the first Chinese cemetery in Canada, Harling Point, Victoria, B.C., 8 April 2001. Courtesy of Neville Poy.



Mary Mah holding her head tax certificate.
Courtesy of May Truong.



Establishment of the Chinese Canadian Heritage Fund, 19 February 2000. Courtesy of SFU Chinese Canadian Heritage Fund.



Alberta Network of Immigrant Women, 4 May 2001. Courtesy of Neville Poy.



Mon Sheong Foundation annual Fun Run, Mother's Day, 2000. Courtesy of Anjelina Kwong.



Grand Opening, Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Toronto, 2 May 1998. Courtesy of ccc of Greater Toronto.



Centre for Information and Community Services' launch of Information Hotline, 18 April 2001. Courtesy of CICS.



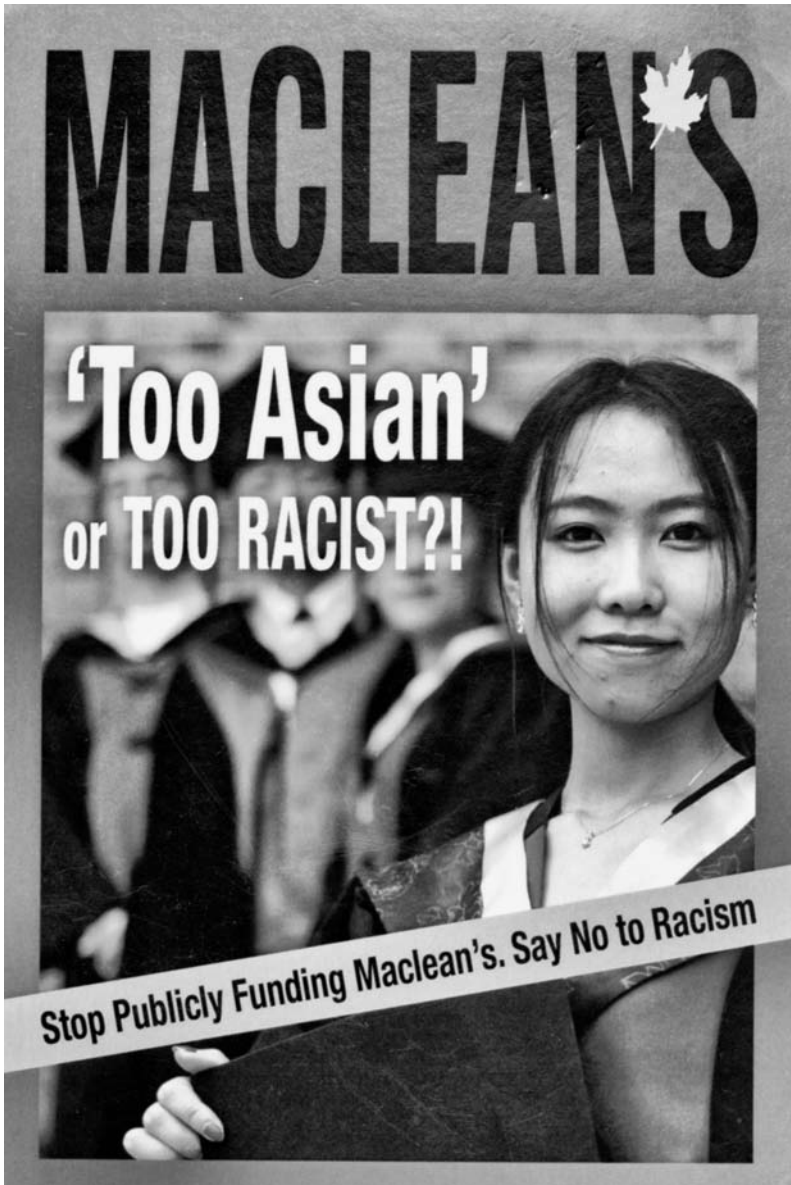
Demonstration of CCCO against W5.
Courtesy of Irene Chu.



Carefirst Community Services, 31 October 2002.
Courtesy of ccs.



“Race in Media and Higher Education,” OISE Town Hall meeting, University of Toronto, 15 February 2011. Courtesy of Yeong-Tong Chia.



"Too Asian" postcard. Courtesy of Jenn Kuo, Graphics Coordinator, Ryerson Students Union.



Safe Driving campaign for the Chinese community,
13 May 1999. Courtesy of Neville Poy.



Federal government's celebration of Asian Heritage Month,
Ottawa, 14 May 2003. Courtesy of Neville Poy.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The eighth of August 2008 was an auspicious day for Chinese Canadian communities. There was a grand celebration in Victoria, British Columbia, which in 1858 had been the first Canadian city to establish a Chinatown; the ceremonies marked the 150th anniversary of recorded Chinese settlement in Canada. There was a whole weekend of celebration, with participation by the federal, provincial, and municipal governments. The mayor of Victoria at the time was Allan Lowe, of Chinese descent. Chinese Canadians across the country received awards for their contributions to the community. This recognition of the success of many Chinese Canadians – despite severe institutional discrimination in the past – and of the present strength of the entire community in Canada was of great significance.

A great deal had happened over those 150 years. Canada had become a country, aided in no small way by Chinese labourers, who helped to open up British Columbia by building roads and working in mines, forestry, and canneries. It was their labour in building the most dangerous section of the Canadian Pacific Railway that had made it possible to link British Columbia to the rest of the country. No one could have imagined at Confederation that the mayor of Victoria would one day be of Chinese origin.

The Canadian government's attitude towards Chinese settlement in Canada has evolved from one of tolerance to exclusion to welcome. What happened? Through the voices of immigrant women, we will learn

how the Chinese community has evolved and the role women played in building successful communities.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, a number of Chinese came to the colony of British Columbia, and many more were brought in during the early 1880s as labourers on the Canadian Pacific Railway. The Chinese constituted the first major group of non-European migrants to enter British Columbia. At the time, there was no official restriction on the entry of any racial group. Since the immigration policy of British North America was traditionally influenced by the constitutional and political links with Britain, the Chinese immigrants had the same rights, liberties, and privileges as other immigrants.¹

Nonetheless, until the latter part of the twentieth century, because Canada's immigration and citizenship policy reflected its relationship with the source countries and because its economic agenda required a search for cheap labour, racism characterized the treatment of the majority of the Chinese who migrated to Canada.² For this reason, when the Canadian Pacific Railway was nearing completion in 1885, the Dominion government imposed a head tax on the Chinese as a deterrent to their entry, and this was subsequently increased twice. However, the tax did not in fact deter their entry. Only when a Chinese exclusion act was passed into law in 1923 was Chinese immigration halted.

The head tax mainly affected the entry of men and adolescent boys. Until 1949, the Chinese communities in Canada consisted mostly of men who worked to send money home to support their families in China; they were bachelor societies. Few women migrated with their men because of the Chinese tradition of keeping the women back home to look after the in-laws, the children, and the graves of the ancestors. This occurred despite the fact that since women are the bearers of children, they should be an inseparable part of the men's lives.

The few Chinese women in Canada came mainly as dependants of the men, as wives, daughters, and servants, though some women brought to Canada were forced to work as prostitutes. The men who brought the women were mostly merchants, though some were ministers of the church and some were teachers. Despite their small numbers, these women played an integral part in the economic survival of the Chinese Canadian communities. In this connection, it is important to note that despite Chinese women's historical lack of equal rights in the family and lack of opportunity to participate in politics and society, they