Chinese Canadian Masculinity During the Exclusion Era

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Abstract

This paper examines how Chinese Canadian men reconstructed ideas and expressions of masculinity in response to the unique pressures of the Chinese exclusion era, defined by the Chinese Headtax and Chinese Exclusion Act. The consequences of anti-Chinese legislation, discourse, and beliefs created a unique environment for Chinese communities in Canada, with few women, limited access to jobs, and oppressive stereotypes. During this time, dominant Canadian culture attempted to isolate Chinese Canadian men from the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. However, these men transformed cultural and social practices to create a distinct Chinese Canadian masculinity and assert manhood within their communities and the larger nation. These assertions included the embodiment of both Western and Chinese ideals of masculine appearance, which allowed men of Chinese heritage to project manhood within society. They also reorganized gendered roles, finding economic success and social respectability through domestic and traditionally feminine labour as exemplified by the prominence of Chinese owned laundries and restaurants during this time. Furthermore, these communities reassigned meaning to interpersonal relationships by placing new significance on homosocial bonds and redefining heterosexual relationship dynamics. The evidence presented argues that Chinese Canadian men resisted Canada's attempts to emasculate them by reimagining community structures and creating new gender ideals that suited Chinese Canadian life.

During the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, Chinese Canadian life was largely shaped by the national policies of exclusion. Chinese men living in Canada during the exclusion era faced racism, stereotypes, and discriminatory legislation which aimed to alienate them from the roles and ideals of hegemonic masculinity. This culture sought to place and maintain white men in positions of economic, social, and political dominance within Canadian society. Chinese Canadian men thus adopted a variety of social and economic practices to express and assert manhood both within their communities and dominant Canadian society. These expressions of masculinity were shaped by Chinese and Western ideas of masculinity and varied across the country. Physically, this manifested in many Chinese Canadian men either adopting Western styles, or leaning into more traditional archetypes associated with Chinese masculinity. Additionally, Chinese Canadian communities reorganized the established gender roles present in cultural and labour practices, transforming traditionally feminine labour like cooking and cleaning into sites of manhood, creating new masculine roles and ideals in the process. Lastly, interpersonal relationships became central to Chinese Canadian masculinity, with these men able to express both Chinese and Western ideals of manhood through their homosocial and heterosexual relationships. These cultural reorganizations allowed Chinese Canadian men to embody the ideals of masculinity in a unique and culturally distinct way. During the exclusion era, the attempts of dominant Canadian society to exclude Chinese Canadian men from hegemonic masculinity led these communities to transform and reimagine gendered ideals, roles, and relationship dynamics, creating a uniquely Chinese Canadian masculinity.[178]

Chinese settlement in Canada dates to the earliest British settlement in British Columbia, with the first major wave of Chinese immigration beginning in 1858 with the Fraser Valley Gold Rush. Additionally, between 1880 and 1885, Chinese labourers helped to build a majority of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in British Columbia. About 17,000 Chinese immigrants arrived during this time,[179] providing cheap essential labour for the construction of the nation-building project. However, after the completion of the CPR Chinese labour was seen as a threat to the jobs of British and other white workers, resulting in federal legislation restricting new immigration into Canada within a year. With few exceptions, the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885 introduced a head tax of $50 for those who wanted to immigrate from China to Canada. In 1901 the fee was increased to $100, and $500 in 1903, at a time when the average

[178] The terms 'masculine' and 'masculinity' were not used broadly in North America until the 1920s, replacing the terms 'manly' and 'manhood'. All four terms will be used in this paper as the period discusses spans before and after this change.
[179] Paul Yee, *Chinatown: An Illustrated History of the Chinese Communities of Victoria, Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal* (Toronto: James Lorimer & company Ltd., Publishers, 2005), 13.

Chinese labourer made about $300 a year.[180] As a result, Chinese immigrants were overwhelmingly men looking to support themselves and their families from overseas. In 1923 the Chinese Immigration Act was replaced with the Chinese Exclusion Act which banned the majority of Chinese immigration altogether with rare exceptions for merchants, students, and diplomats. Supporters of these bills saw the immigration of Chinese people into Canada as a threat to the colonial order. As MP Alan Webster Neill argued, Chinese Canadians would begin to 'overrun' the country, eventually destroying Canadian civilization.[181] The period between the introduction of anti-Chinese immigration laws and the repeal of these laws in 1947 constitutes the Exclusion Era, which resulted in Chinese-Canadian communities becoming known as bachelor societies due to the lack of Chinese women.

Racist ideas and stereotypes about Chinese society and the dangers of male Chinese Communities shaped how Chinese Canadian men navigated life in Canada. Anti-Chinese rhetoric, as expressed by intellectuals and institutions such as the Canadian Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration, was defined by the belief that China as a nation had been civilized for too long and had evolutionarily and morally degenerated. The dominant culture understood Chinese men as having lost their manhood due to this over-civilization, regained only through opium-induced sexual desire.[182] Chinese Canadian men also faced less intellectualized stereotypes, with white Canadians seeing them as unclean, backward, alien and strange, and capable of having hypnotic powers.[183] To combat these stereotypes and regain their manliness in the public sphere, Chinese men living in Canada altered and transformed their culture, practices, and gendered roles, creating new, uniquely Chinese Canadian, masculine ideals.

In addition to the racist policies and beliefs of those outside the Chinese Canadian community, figures and organizations within the Chinese community also influenced how these men shaped their masculinity. Chinese political groups competed and cooperated for influence across Canada, projecting ideals for China and Chinese diaspora. The Kuomintang or Chinese Nationalist League was a Chinese political party founded in 1894 with Canadian headquarters in Vancouver and Winnipeg.[184] The party gained significant power and influence beginning in 1926 before becoming the sole

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[180] Arlene Chan, *Chinese Immigration Act* (The Canadian Encyclopedia, March 7, 2017) www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/chinese-immigration-act.
[181] Dominion of Canada, *House of Commons Debates*, 11 July 1924 (Mr. Neill): 4352-4354, parl.canadiana.ca/view/oop.debates_HOC1403_05.
[182] Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925: With A New Introduction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 110-111.
[183] El Chenier, "Sex, Intimacy, and Desire Among Men of Chinese Heritage and Women of Non-Asian Heritage in Toronto, 1910-1950," *Urban History Review/Revue d'Histoire Urbaine* 42, no. 2 (2014): 33, doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/43562434.
[184] Alison R. Marshall, "Early Chinese Migrant Religious Identities in Pre-1947 Canada," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (2023): 240, www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/early-chinese-migrant-religious-identities-pre/docview/2886078360/se-2.

ruling party of China from 1928 to 1949. Party leaders were primarily Christian and emphasized a Westernized vision for modern China. The Kuomintang often worked closely with other Chinese organizations such as the Chee Kung Tong or Chinese Freemasons, a Chinese secret society established in 1880 or the Zhonghua Huiguan (Chinese Benevolent Association).[185] The Zhonghua Huiguan worked in cities like Victoria to unite factions of the Chinese Canadian community, acting as a community leader and community voice toward local and federal government.[186]

Chinese Canadian men transformed their masculine presentation most directly by adopting Western masculine styles of appearance. Many men, for example, chose to cut their hair rather than wear the traditional *queue* hairstyle, with the top of the head shaved and the hair on the back of the head grown long and typically braided. Wearing the *queue* was expected of Chinese men to show loyalty to the emperor during the Qing Dynasty, while wearing short hair instead signified a desire to assimilate into Western masculinity and embrace modernity. This was particularly common in areas with a significant presence of the Kuomintang which encouraged Chinese Canadians to adopt Western styles to show support for the party's vision for a modern China.[187] These Western hairstyles were often accompanied by Western dress for men who looked to integrate into the larger Canadian culture through association with the norms and ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Chinese Canadian masculinity was also influenced by Chinese ideals, particularly by political leaders who modeled Chinese understandings of manliness. For example, Kuomintang leader Sun Yet-sen influenced a rise in the masculine archetype of the *haohan*, characterized as physically strong, emotionally restrained, and valuing male relationships.[188] When Sun Yet-sen died in 1925, members of the collective leadership who took on responsibility of the Party inspired a rise of rougher traditionally masculine ideals which valued bravery and courage.[189]

The lack of women of Chinese heritage in Chinese Communities across Canada resulted in the reorganization of traditionally gendered roles, especially within cultural practices and everyday life. One of the most important duties of women was to provide the food necessary for large traditional celebrations, a job which had to be redistributed within the Canadian context of the exclusion era. In many Chinese Canadian communities, it became the responsibility of elders or respected Chinese organizations like the Kuomintang or Zhigontang to provide these celebratory foods that brought the

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[185] The Victoria association was the first established in Canada and was known as the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association. Groups with variations of this name can be found in cities across Canada.

[186] Influence and rivalry of these political groups further discussed by David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinese Community Leadership Case Study of Victoria in Canada* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010).

[187] Alison R. Marshall, *The Way of the Bachelor: Early Chinese Settlement in Manitoba* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 72.

[188] Pamela Hunt, "The Road Home: Rebellion, The Market and Masculinity in the Han Han Phenomenon," *China Perspectives* no. 3 (January 2020): 32, https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.10372.

[189] Marshall, *The Way of the Bachelor*, 173-175.

community together. Traditional festivals and meals became important not only culturally, but also to create and strengthen ties outside of the Chinese Community. For example, in Manitoba, members of the Kuomintang took on the traditionally feminine roles of organizing, hosting, and providing food for traditional festivals, ranging from formal dinners to annual public picnics.[190] These events preserved cultural practices while simultaneously providing environments to strengthen inter- and intra-community relationships. Many such events brought Chinese Communities together with local white Churches and/or dignitaries. In Manitoba especially, these intercommunity relationships contributed to the Chinese Canadian community facing less racism compared to other Canadian Chinatowns.[191] Cooking and hosting large meals like these became uniquely important in many Chinese Canadian contexts, transforming from a role served by women to one fulfilled by the most important and respected men of Chinese Canadian communities.

Taking on the traditional domestic roles of women in China empowered Chinese Canadian men to thrive economically as well as socially. Commercializing the domestic labour of cleaning and cooking, through laundries and restaurants, brought Chinese Canadian men across the country the most economic success.[192] After the completion of the railway, Chinese labourers came to be seen as direct threats to the white working and middle classes. Racist views and discriminatory practices kept Chinese men out of a large portion of jobs and industries in Canada, and by locking Chinese men out of the labour force, these men were also essentially locked out of the norms and ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

Chinese Canadian-owned laundries were male spaces where between one and eight men would live and work. Without the families of these workers present, many had no outside obligations, allowing them to work up to thirteen-hour shifts which in turn kept prices lower than any white-owned laundry could compete with.[193] The lack of specialized training, need for advanced business knowledge, or investment money made opening laundries appealing for many Chinese men, who would often take on business partners to fund the establishment of their laundries.[194] As higher demand was placed on laundries, business owners sponsored the immigration of male relatives and friends from China to keep up with the workload. Often, after being trained, these men would go on to establish their own laundry, further cementing the laundry business and a Chinese Canadian niche.[195] Thus, the loss of manly respectability due to the feminine

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[190] Marshall, *The Way of the Bachelor*, 37.

[191] Alison Marshall explains how Chinese Canadians faced less racism the closer they were to Winnipeg. For further reading as to why this phenomenon occurred see: Alison R. Marshall, *The Way of the Bachelor: Early Chinese Settlement in Manitoba* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 9.

[192] Yee, *Chinatown*, 13.

[193] Marshall, *The Way of the Bachelor*, 64.

[194] Ban Seng Hoe, *Enduring Hardship The Chinese Laundry in Canada* (Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2003), 12.

[195] Ibid., 13.

nature of such work was negated by gaining masculine status as economically successful breadwinners and business owners.

The major alternative to laundries for Chinese men looking to find economic success and a place within hegemonic masculinity was the restaurant business. Like laundry, food preparation was traditionally considered women's work in both China and Canada, particularly in rural Canada where woman-run inns were the only place to buy a meal in most small towns.[196] Chinese Canadians who established Chinese restaurants found more economic success, as well as higher social and masculine status than the laundry business could provide. Despite the feminine nature of the work, Chinese restaurant owners often became wealthy and respected community leaders, which enhanced their manliness and respectability.

Chinese-owned restaurants became incredibly popular within the Chinese and non-Chinese Communities around the country, serving meals from both the Chinese and British traditions. These restaurants often provided community gathering spaces, particularly in rural areas where they were the only restaurant in town. Before 1923, restaurant owners were often successful enough to fund the immigration of their families, paying the exorbitant head tax for male family members who could come work in the restaurant, before sponsoring their wives and children.[197] The result of economic success, as well as having family present brought many restaurant-owning men further into the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and manly respectability among both the Chinese and non-Chinese Communities. Restaurant ownership also allowed Chinese Canadian men to fulfill masculine ideals on a more physical level. Restaurant labour was less draining on the body and more financially rewarding than laundry work, granting men more access to nutritious food and allowing them to fit into the masculine ideals of physical strength and male vitality.[198] With this, Chinese Canadian communities created a unique masculine ideal which balanced traditionally feminine labour with masculine respectability.

Chinese-owned restaurants were often the only spaces where white Canadians regularly interacted with Chinese Canadians. This meant that Chinese restaurants became spaces of inter-community mixing, which in some areas, particularly in Manitoba, helped to lessen racist and anti-Chinese sentiment compared to other parts of Canada, as white communities formed relationships with Chinese communities.[199] However, in many other areas, Chinese restaurants became a point of anxiety for those who feared interracial mixing.

Interracial and intra-racial relationships were a major aspect through which Chinese Canadian men navigated traditional and Western ideals of masculinity. Within Chinese Canadian communities, transforming traditional relationship structures and

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[196] Marshall, *The Way of the Bachelor*, 84.
[197] Ibid., 92.
[198] Marshall, *The Way of the Bachelor*, 203.
[199] Ibid., 9.

the value placed on these relationships was one of the primary shifts made to renegotiate masculinity. Chinese Confucian tradition dictated that there were five types of relationships, each with their own position on the hierarchy of importance; 1. Ruler to subject, 2. Father to son, 3. Husband to wife, 4. Brother to brother, 5. Friend to friend. This hierarchy of importance was transformed by many Chinese Communities across Canada as male friendships became the most important relationships for navigating Canadian life, particularly in rural areas where even fewer Chinese women were present than in larger urban Chinatowns. In Canada, male friendships often became hierarchical rather than equal, typically in terms of local political influence and social status.[200] These homosocial friendships largely replaced the Chinese heterosexual relationship dynamics that were central to traditional Chinese understandings of manliness which framed manhood in relation to the subordination of women, instead, reframing manliness in relation to status over male friends.[201] These friendships were essential for economic success and social status, as many men relied on male friends to run their businesses while they made trips to visit friends and family around Canada, return to China to marry and have children, or visit wives and children they were unable to bring to Canada.[202] With this help, Chinese Canadian men could bolster their masculine status through continued economic success as well as new or continued heterosexual relationships with Chinese women.

Chinese men did still engage in heterosexual and social relationships in Canada despite the lack of Chinese women. The assumption that Chinese women would be the only available partners for Chinese men created stereotypes and expectations of Chinese men as a largely celibate group. While many of these men may have been effectively celibate during their time in Canada, relationships between white women and Chinese men were not uncommon.[203] The idea of inter-racial relationships between Chinese men and white women was a point of anxiety across the country, at a time when the slogan "White Canada Forever" informed the dominant mindset,[204] causing fears of race mixing, interracial marriage, and mixed-race children.[205] Chinese men were framed as dangerous to white women due to their corrupting influence, hypnotic powers, and perceived asexuality which could lure white women to become victims of a dangerous opium-induced Chinese sexuality or be manipulated into smoking opium,

[200] Ibid., 2.
[201] Hunt, "The Road Home: Rebellion, The Market, and Masculinity," 34.
[202] Marshall, *The Way of the Bachelor*, 107.
[203] Chinese Canadian men may have also expressed sexuality with other men, however, this expression would not have been seen as masculinizing within the Chinese Canadian context and is thus out of the scope of this paper. For further reading on traditional Chinese understandings of same-sex attraction and gender see Song Geng, "Jasper-like Face and Rosy Lips: Same-Sex Desire and the Male Body." In *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture*, (Hong Kong University Press, 200) 125–56.
[204] Discussion of racial categorization and segregation in Canada's state formation further explored by Timothy J. Stanley, "John A. Macdonald, 'the Chinese' and Racist State Formation in Canada," *Journal of Critical Race Inquiry* 3, no. 1 (2016): 6-34, https://doi.org/10.24908/jcri.v3i1.5974.
[205] Chenier, "Sex, Intimacy, and Desire," 32.

and dissolving the racial sexual boundaries. The result of such fears was legislation introduced barring white women from working in or frequenting Chinese-owned businesses, framed as protection of white women from sexual slavery.[206] The White Women's Labour Law, enacted in Saskatewan in 1912 before influencing copycat laws in provinces across the country, aimed to distance Chinese Canadian men from hegemonic masculinity in two ways. The first was by sabotaging the economic success of Chinese business owners, particularly restaurant owners, who largely hired white female waitresses for their cheap labour. The second method was by attempting to isolate Chinese men from the largest demographic of maritally available women, thus affecting heterosexual and social relationships and hegemonic masculinity.

In reality, urban cities like Toronto saw about a third of Chinese men in marriages or common-law relationships with white women, while others participated in long-term companionate marriages or commercial sexual relationships.[207] These relationships were also often sites of traditional gender role transformation due to external pressures against such relationships. Many Chinese Canadian men surrendered the level of authority over women that they would have had over Chinese women, or that white men had over their partners in traditional relationship dynamics. They often took on a significant load of domestic labour, such as cooking and cleaning for their partners. The advantages Chinese men brought to relationships with white women were typically meant to compensate for the reduction in social status and connections that white women faced due to their taboo relationships, especially if the couple was not legally married.[208] Not only were white women in relationships with Chinese men assumed to be prostitutes, but they were frequent targets of the morality police, who could harass and arrest white women who frequented Chinatown or Chinese-owned businesses. Women who married their Chinese partners also often struggled to find work with a Chinese surname, lost their status as British subjects, and could be disowned by their white families and shunned from white communities.[209] Thus, many women were motivated to stay in these relationships despite hardships thanks to the experience of increased autonomy and decreased household labour. Even relationships between Chinese Canadian men and white sex workers saw these kinds of non-traditional gender dynamics. While many of these men paid sex workers in cash, many also accompanied these payments with a wide range of other benefits including cooking fresh meals, cleaning or other domestic labour, or gifting clothing, jewellery, and household goods.[210] The result of these inter-racial relationship dynamics was

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[206] Constance Backhouse, "Mesalliances' and the 'Menace to White Women's Virtue': Yee Clun's Opposition to the White Women's Labour Law, Saskatchewan, 1924," in *Colour-Coded a Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1999), 132-172, 140-143.
[207] Chenier, "Sex, Intimacy, and Desire," 31.
[208] Ibid., 33.
[209] Ibid., 35.
[210] Ibid., 33.

decreased masculine roles within the home in exchange for increased masculine respectability outside of the home.

Ultimately, during the Exclusion Era, legislation and anti-Chinese sentiment attempted to block Chinese Canadian men from reaching the norms, ideals, and roles of hegemonic masculinity. In response, these men expressed and lived out their manliness in a variety of ways, within both their local Chinese Communities and dominant society. While the legal and social contexts varied across Canada, patterns in the techniques used by Chinese Canadian men to regain manhood did emerge. Physically, some men leaned into Western masculinity in their appearance while others embraced traditional Chinese masculine archetypes. The reorganization of gendered roles within cultural practices was essential in preserving these traditions and redefining masculine roles in the process. Many Chinese Canadian men were only able to establish themselves within economic masculine ideals by working in traditionally feminine labour roles like cleaning and cooking, establishing successful laundries and restaurants. Recharacterizing relationship dynamics was also essential to navigating masculine ideals, placing new importance on homosocial relationships and redefining heterosexual relationships. Chinese Canadian men navigated Canada's attempt to emasculate them, responding with expressions of agency by envisioning a uniquely Chinese Canadian version of masculinity.

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