

Ethnic Enclave? Sex and the Myth of Isolation in Twentieth Century Chinese Canadian History

Elise Chenier
Simon Fraser University
604-255-9236
echenier@gmail.com

Chinese Canadians offer a dramatic example of an immigrant group that, until quite recently, lived in ‘ethnic enclaves.’ The term ethnic enclave has been used to document how racist ideologies forced minority ethnic groups to settle in less-desirable urban neighbourhoods.¹

SLIDE Historians, sociologists and economists have also shown how such residential and business concentration allowed groups to form tight-knit communities that facilitated networks of support which proved essential to survival, to advancement, and ultimately to challenging the very racist and ethnocentric beliefs and practices that pushed them to the social and political margins. As a category of analysis, ‘ethnic enclave’ has help map out the history of race, ethnicity, and migration. But it is also misleading; it draws our attention away from the many forms of contact that crossed racial, ethnic, and cultural lines, contact that went beyond what was necessary for mere survival.² Consequently, the history of Chinese Canadians and Americans exists in an historiographic enclave, separate and distinct from, but also enclosed and trapped within, a larger, white Canadian historiography.

Drawing on oral interviews, personal photographic archives and Toronto’s tabloid press, this paper presents the preliminary results of my research on the history of sexual intimacy

¹ Kay J. Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995); Multicultural History Society of Ontario, *Gathering Place: Peoples and Neighbourhoods of Toronto, 1834-1945*, Studies in Ethnic and Immigration History (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1985).

² For examples of recent literature that explores political relationships with non-Chinese Canadians see Lisa Rose Mar, *Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada’s Exclusion Era, 1885-1945* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2010); Stephanie Bangarth, “We Are Not Asking You to Open Wide the Gates for Chinese Immigration’: The Committee for the Repeal of the Chinese Immigration Act and Early Human Rights Activism in Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 84, no. 3 (September 2003): 395–422.

between white women and Chinese men in Toronto between roughly 1920 and 1960. Qualitative evidence of interracial relationships complicates the dominant paradigm of segregation and isolation. When we include in the history of Chinese Canada the white women who engaged in intimate relations with Chinese Canadian men, a more heterogeneous picture of Toronto's Chinatown community, and a more multifaceted social history, emerges. Simply put, when we place the history of sexuality at the centre of our analysis, it becomes clear that Chinese Canadians were not as isolated as the current historiography suggests.

Up until the mid-1960s, most male Chinese Canadian migrants lived out their adult lives in bleak isolation, or so the story goes. **SLIDE** Sojourners' own ambition to return home with more wealth than he could hope to earn in Guangdong province, the region from which most migrated, combined with the imposition of ever-increasing "head taxes" on Chinese migrants, **SLIDE** the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act, and intense racism among non-Asians toward the Chinese meant that the vast majority were doomed to live their lives without the emotional, material, or domestic support or even simple companionship traditionally provided by wives and children. Consequently, scholars characterize pre-reunification North American Chinese communities as 'bachelor societies.' Although many men made trips home to marry and father children, most returned to Canada to continue working, and were *de facto* bachelors if not bachelors in fact. Enforced bachelorhood is a central motif in the history of the Chinese overseas experience; it serves as a powerful and poignant marker of just how circumscribed these men's lives were.

Yet neither historians nor sociologists have undertaken empirical research on what precisely it meant to live in a bachelor society. We know that capitalism and racism combined to create conditions of poverty, forcing many men to engaging in long hours of work which

furthered their social isolation, but we have yet to explore how together these conditions placed enormous constraints on possibilities for finding emotional and sexual intimacy with an opposite sex partner.³ **SLIDE** What possibilities for intimacy, sociability, and domesticity existed? We know a lot about white Canadians anxieties about Chinese Canadian bachelor societies, **SLIDE** but how were cultural values and beliefs about intimacy and morality reshaped for Chinese Canadians; how were ideas about masculinity, family, and sexual desire re-formulated in distant contexts?

Although many Chinese migrants returned home to marry a Chinese woman and father children, the majority planned to return permanently to China and did not, therefore, sponsor their wives to join them overseas. Had they wanted to, restrictive immigration laws prohibited them from doing so. Consequently, Chinese overseas communities were predominantly male, and historians frequently point out the high male to female ratio among Chinese Canadians in the pre-WWII era to emphasize the point. However, the use of such demographics hides a striking reality. Interracial relations were much more common than the literature would have us believe. Sexual and intimate relationships developed across racial lines throughout this period, and had important effects for those who participated in them. Acknowledging this history requires us to place sexual desire *and* the history of sex work at the centre of our analysis. In so doing, a more heterogeneous image of Chinatown, and of the experience of Chinese, emerges.

SLIDE Certainly the evidence is there to prove the point. In 1953 *Justice Weekly*, Toronto's premier yellow newspaper, reported that 54 year-old Bing Chong and 32 year-old

³ Madeline Hsu, "Unwrapping Orientalist Constraints: Restoring Homosocial Normativity to Chinese American History," *Amerasia Journal* 29, no. 2 (2003): 229–253; Nayan Shah, "Between 'Oriental Depravity' and 'Natural Degenerates': Spatial Borderlands and the Making of Ordinary Americans," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2005): 703–725; Jennifer Ting, "Bachelor Society: Deviant Heterosexuality and Asian American Historiography," in *Priviledging Positions: The Sites of Asian American Studies* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1995), 271–279.

Rose Robitaille were jointly charged with keeping a common bawdy house at 61 Mutual Street, located half-way between Toronto's Chinatown and the city's tenderloin district. Though some historians might write this incident off as too salacious, too improper, or too marginal to merit further attention, such stories illustrate how the search for sexual pleasure led to more than just a demand for sex trade workers, it also led to business relationships between Chinese men interested in such services and white women willing to arrange and provide them. The desire for physical contact, sexual engagement, and stable companionship led white women and Chinese men to form mutually beneficial relationships that complicate the historiographic picture. Rose and Bing may have been business associates, they may have also been lovers or even a common-law couple. Either way, their story is a clue to how adapting to and negotiating the various social and economic constraints non-Chinese working class women and Chinese men faced, they formed hybrid, affective relationships that undermine the notion of Chinatowns as ethnic enclaves, and the perception that Chinese men lived sexless, loveless lives as isolated bachelors.

I want to draw on the oral testimony of Mavis Chu because her story, as we shall see, tells us a great deal about how different cultural norms and values evolved as a result of the normalization of commercial sex in Chinatown. Chu is the first-born daughter of Eileen Neeson and Chu Yet San, whose Canadian name was Harry Chu. Eileen Neeson came from a respectable, well-to-do Anglo-Canadian family. Raised in Toronto, she enjoyed many of the privileges of upper-middle class family life. Some time in 1923, however, her life took an unconventional turn. Harry Chu, an employee of the Oriental Trading Company who took the small gift shop's wares door-to-door with the store's wares came knocking on the Neeson family's door. Well-travelled and always curious to learn about different people from other parts of the world, Mr. Neeson invited him inside. His daughter Eileen, then 18 years old, was

charmed by Chu, and from that day on visited him in his Yonge Street shop as frequently as she could manage. She and Harry shared cups of tea and grew increasingly enamored of each other. Chu's local kinship network, however, became alarmed by the budding romance, and they quickly shipped Harry home to Guangdong province where he was married off to a Chinese wife. Within the year his wife gave birth to a boy. When Harry returned to Toronto, he did so alone, as was the practice and the fate of overseas married men. By that time Eileen had also married, and had given birth to twins. Nevertheless when Eileen became aware of Harry's return, she began visiting him once again, and in 1932 or '33 took the very unusual step of leaving her middle-class Anglo-Canadian husband to establish a household with Harry. **SLIDE** She assumed she would retain custody of the children of her first marriage, but tragically she was mistaken. Men retained legal right to the custody of children and as a white woman who chose a Chinese lover, she had virtually no chance of successfully challenging her husband's claim.

Eileen's life course followed the trajectory of an immigrant, not a middle-class white Canadian, woman. Estranged from her family of origin, she rarely left Chinatown. She had three children with Harry. Sadly, Harry died of cancer within a decade of setting up a household with Eileen. Eileen had few options but to find a suitable husband to help support her family. Her second husband, Low, was a friend of her first husband's. His income was not enough to provide for the family's needs so Eileen and Low began taking in boarders. They and their three children occupied two rooms on the main floor of a large rented house; the rest of the rooms in the house were let out to single Chinese men.

Chinatown was Toronto's second red light district. A steady traffic of women serviced the needs of the bachelor community. Sex trade workers' pick-up line was "ten and three?" meaning ten dollars for sex, three dollars for the room. Sex negotiated on the street, however,

may have been the least common form of commercial sex. These relationships were a well-integrated part of everyday public *and* private life.

Play Clip

As we can see, those who lived within the orbit of the bachelor society had sharply different attitudes toward sex workers from those in mainstream society. Most regarded sex trade workers as social outcasts, as morally depraved, and outside the family. Their labour was criminalized and stigmatized, and if they had children, they were more at risk of having them removed by the state than were the children of other women. These attitudes had no place in Toronto's Chinatown; sex trade workers were not unwelcome. For example, not only was commercial sex a normative part of the day-to-day lives of Chinese Canadian men, it was also integrated into Mavis' family life thus indicating that white Canadian attitudes toward sex workers have no place in the history of the people of Chinese heritage in Toronto. The comings-and-goings of boarders' girlfriends were part of the everyday rhythm of the household. Rather than shield their children from the intimate goings-on in the family household, rather than shun the women who traded their time and skill as love-makers and companions, Mavis' parents integrated them into the warp and woof of domestic life. They understood that like their male boarders, these women were real people with real needs who did the best they could with the limited resources available to them.⁴

Indeed, sex trade workers were so well integrated into Mavis' family household that one of these women, who was the regular companion of Mavis's uncle, earned the honorific 'Auntie.'

Mavis' family experience is illustrative, not exceptional, of postwar life in Toronto's Chinatown. Sex trade workers and interracial couples were not just present, and they more than

⁴ Social capital would be one of those resources of which these women and men had but little.

merely tolerated. They were a part of the everyday life in Chinatown. Sex trade workers filled local Chinese restaurants where they moved their propositioning skills from the streets to the seats. Some, like Flo, eventually left the Chinatown neighbourhood but others married or lived common-law with their Chinese male partners and raised families together. Mixed race children born to sex trade workers were adopted by married Chinese couples and single Chinese men. Sex trade workers were part of what made the community work, grow and in some ways, prosper, and here I don't just mean economically. Though not under conditions of their own choosing, women found ways to supplement their income and men found much desired companionship. In some cases, they together formed deep affective relationships. Sex and money was not the sum total of many of these relationships. There was friendship, familiarity, comfort and succor to be found in them.

Treating sex trade workers as if they 'count', and acknowledging bachelors' need and desire for sex and intimacy, however, is not something we are trained to do. Like gambling dens and opium smoking, exchanging sex for money is treated as the less respectable side of Canada's otherwise upstanding Chinese community. This is not to say that the Chinese Canadian communities are not upstanding, but that the measure of 'upstanding' is taken according to a set of values that most people in the community did not share. In a recent publication, for example, historian John Zucchi writes: "By the late 19th century the rich associational life of Chinese bachelors, distant husbands and a few families filled in the quarters. True, gambling dens and brothels retained a presence but temples, schools, churches and other properties owned by organizations emerged with time." By phrasing it thusly, we apply a set of judgments, standards and measures from the viewpoint of mainstream white society, not from the viewpoint of

Chinatown residents for whom gambling dens and brothels were equally if not more valued than churches, temples and schools.