

Panel Presentation by Senator Vivienne Poy

**World Conference of Institutes and
Libraries in Chinese Overseas Studies**

**Experiences of Immigrant Chinese Women
with Canadian Immigration (1950-1990)**

UBC, Vancouver, May 17, 2012

Good morning scholars and friends:

What were the Chinese Canadian communities across Canada like before the Second World War? They were bachelor societies whose members suffered severe discrimination, and those who were able to graduate from professional schools in Canada were not allowed to practice in the professions. Most Chinese businesses were fruit and vegetable shops, general stores, restaurants and laundries, and they remained very much Chinatown based.

Today, the Chinese communities are flourishing and members are in different levels of government and at the top of many professions, with a large number holding Canada Research Chairs. Chinese Canadians are courted by major Canadian corporations and by the different political parties. Chinatowns across Canada have become tourist attractions.

This morning, I am going to trace this transition through the lives and experiences of Chinese women who immigrated to Canada from 1950 to 1990, and show how Canadian immigration law and regulations impacted their entry. Why the women? I believe successful communities are built by families, in which the women play an important role. With the women are their children and mothers always strive for a good future for them. Women who arrived in Canada in the post-war years were a catalyst for the Chinese communities, who helped shape modern-day Canadian society.

At the end of the Second World War, there were very few Chinese women in Canada. This was often blamed on Chinese exclusion in Canadian immigration policy. However, those of us who know Chinese history and tradition know that Chinese women did not go overseas. They were expected to remain in China to look after the in-laws, usually the mothers-in-law, because the fathers-in-law were also overseas, their young children, and to tend to the graves of their husbands' ancestors.

After the World War II, the pattern of entry of Chinese women changed. The reason for this was not only because of the repeal of Chinese exclusion (Order-in-Council pc1378) by the Canadian government. (Since then, and until 1957, all Chinese Canadians were under Order-in Council pc 2115, which did not permit them to apply for their

families to immigrate to Canada until they acquired their citizenship.) I believe the Japanese invasion of China and the subsequent civil war played a greater part in the immigration of wives and their young children to Canada. The reunification of families became even more urgent after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, because it was no longer possible for the Chinese Canadian men to return to visit their families. The Chinese Communist policy, intermittently, regarded them and their families, as belonging to the landlord class, and so those left behind were frequently victimized.

Here's a quote about the conditions from one of my interviewees:

In 1949, the land my father-in-law bought was confiscated by the Communist government, and we suffered greatly for belonging to the landlord class. Life for us under Communist rule was like being prisoners except we were not locked up. Now that the government owned everything, everyone worked for them. The landless peasants were doing well, and they became the bosses. We never had enough to eat. All the children had to be put into government nurseries while the parents worked.

Every morning, we had to report to work, on our knees, to the village cadres, and they would assign work to us for that day, such as cutting a hundred catty of firewood, or repairing a dam. At the end of the day, we had to return to report, again on our knees, not only what we'd done that day, but also what we'd had to eat. That was only until the communes were established in the late 1950s, and everyone ate at public dining halls.

When we got sick, we still had to report in the morning, and if the cadres believed us, we would be excused from work that day. Pregnant women had to work until labour started, and for those with small children, the mother had to carry the baby on her back while she worked. Women attached fans on their backs to shield their babies from the sun.

It was fortunate that the Canadian government made it possible, in 1947, for families of Chinese Canadians to come to Canada. For the next 20 years, Chinese women immigrated to Canada as dependents of men.

Right after the repeal of Chinese exclusion in 1947, as the first Canadian Citizenship Act (1946) came into effect, Chinese Canadians started to apply for Canadian citizenship, which enabled them to sponsor their families from China. This only applied to wives and unmarried minor children. The age of the children was later relaxed for humanitarian reasons. At the beginning, there were very few arrivals.

Table of entry of dependants

1946-47	7
1947-48	24
1948-49	111
1949-50	1,028
1950-51	2,178

Despite allowing the reunification of Chinese Canadian families, the selection of immigrants continued to be based on race and culture, with a preference for immigrants from Europe.

However, in the 1950s, due to the lack of ethnic Chinese females of marriageable age, the regulations were relaxed to allow the immigration of fiancés from China and Hong Kong. Many came as picture brides in order to have a new chance in *Gum San*.

Through direct correspondence with relatives or through professional matchmakers, Chinese Canadian bachelors would arrange a “blind marriage” to a poor Chinese girl who had little hope of marrying any but the poorest Chinese boy back home. These young women would likely be marrying men twice or three times their age, whom they had to care for, and in most cases, had to work for as well.

The following is a success story of a picture bride who married a widower:

My future husband was looking for a tall and strong bride. I was picked not only because I was the prettiest, but I'm also tall, in fact, taller than my husband. I had never met my husband until we got married, but my mother had. Soon after he saw my photograph, he picked me as his future bride. At age 22, I went to Hong Kong from my village in south China to await further news. It was easy for me to get out of China because we were poor.

In Hong Kong, I received mail frequently from Canadian immigration, and it only took nine months before I was granted immigration status, and without a personal interview with an immigration officer! I do believe that it was because the immigration officer was sympathetic to the children of my husband, especially to the youngest daughter who had to be given to another woman to care for her because he couldn't manage.

Because I was a picture bride, a deposit had to be given for me before I was allowed to come to Canada, as a guarantee that when I met my husband, if either of us should decide not to marry, there would be enough money for me to return to China. I had my medical and my future husband bought me a boat ticket.

The boat went to San Francisco [no boat travelled directly to Vancouver at that time]. The trip took eighteen days, and an additional two days by train to Vancouver.

I left Hong Kong on November 7th, 1952, and the marriage took place the following January. Our age difference was thirteen years. My first daughter was born that November.

I'm used to hard work in China. I helped my husband in his shoe repair shop, which he ran during the day, and he also worked as a welder in a shipyard from four p.m. to eleven p.m. I helped until the birth of my third child. My husband had three children from his first wife, and I had five of my own. I really had a handful. Life was difficult then, not like now.

By 1961, prosperity in Europe and slow economic growth in Canada, together with a policy of “selective immigration,” discouraged the entry of unskilled workers from

Europe, resulting in the lowest level of immigration since 1947. During 1962, a growing number of business people began to express support for higher immigration as a stimulus to economic growth. The search for immigrant professionals was intensified by the need to replace Canadians who were accepting higher paying jobs in the United States. Due to the need for skilled labour, senior bureaucrats in the immigration department came up with a formula for the acceptance of immigrants based on skills and education and not on race. This new emphasis resulted in large-scale racial and ethnic diversification in Canada, which altered the dynamics of integration.

The following two stories will illustrate this well, particularly since both these women were fluent in English. The first is an interviewee who worked as a secretary for European companies in Hong Kong:

In 1963, I went to the Canadian immigration in Hong Kong to get a tourist visa to visit my sister in Burnaby, B.C. During my interview, to my surprise, the immigration officer persuaded me to get an immigration visa instead. He said if I didn't want to stay in Canada, all I had to do was leave.

While staying with my sister in Burnaby, I sent letters of application to various companies to look for work. Within two weeks, I was offered a job with an engineering company.

Here's another interviewee who trained as a nurse:

I applied for Canadian immigration in Australia. When I went to get the application form, I was asked to have my physical right away. My interview with the immigration officer only lasted half an hour. Within two weeks, I got my visa. The reason was that Canada had a shortage of nurses at that time, and I was trained, not only in one of the Commonwealth countries, but also in the largest hospital in the southern hemisphere.

In 1966, the National Employment Service of the Department of Labour and the Immigration Service of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration amalgamated to form the new Department of Manpower and Immigration. In the same year, the government published its *White Paper on Immigration*, which emphasized no discrimination by reason of race, colour or religion. Canada was under-populated. Not only were more people needed to increase the domestic market, the Canadian economy also needed highly qualified workers.

As a result, international students who graduated from Canadian universities with job offers could apply immediately for landed immigrant status.

The following is an interview of such a graduate:

I applied to a Canadian university to do my master's degree, and came to Canada on a student visa in 1965. When I finished the following year, teachers were in great demand. I opened the newspaper and saw that a school in a small town in northern Ontario was looking for a teacher in my major. I applied and was offered the job. Then I needed to establish my status in Canada.

According to the immigration regulations at the time, it was very easy for me. In 1966, because of my job offer, I was granted landed immigrant status that September. My teaching job was probationary because I needed to get my Ontario teacher's certificate, which meant that I had to take courses for two summers.

Based on the points system established in 1967, immigration to Canada for Chinese women was changed forever because they no longer had to be dependents of men. Their eligibility would be based on their own education and skills. Since then, some men immigrate to Canada as co-dependents or dependents of their wives.

The following is an interviewee who worked as a nurse in Hong Kong, and her main reason for immigration was for the sake of better access to higher education in Canada for her daughters:

My husband and I applied to Canadian Immigration. We were co-applicants because we needed to put both our points together to have enough. Being an office clerk, my husband didn't have enough points, and I had more points for being a nurse. We arrived in Canada in August 1970.

Immigration is always dependent on the push and pull factors. At the beginning of the 1980s, after Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher signed the agreement to return the sovereignty of Hong Kong to China, there was a massive exodus of Hong Kongers to western democracies, and Canada was the top country of choice for immigration.

The following is the story of an interviewee whose family chose to come to Canada because they liked the Canadian way of life, and it's political stability. Both she and her husband were professionals in Hong Kong:

In 1988, my husband and I applied to immigrate to Canada. It was decided that I should be the principal applicant, due to the occupational demand of Canada at the time. The demand was for administrators and counselors, and I was in that category, which meant that I would get more points in the points system whereas my husband would have received no points for his occupation. In 1989, we landed in Canada, and then went back to Hong Kong to tie up loose ends.

At the beginning of 1990, our family came to Canada to stay. I started looking for work in the areas of my training and experience. By that time, the economic cycle was already on its way down. Despite the fact that my training was supposed to be more in need in Canada than my husband's, he was the one who got a job, soon after our arrival, which was related to his qualification.

Like other immigrant welcoming countries, the Canadian government instituted the investor and entrepreneur categories in immigration, attracting wealthy Hong Kongers to Canada. The following is an interviewee who applied in the investor programme.

In 1988, I went from California to Montreal for an interview with Canadian Immigration. There was a panel of four or five interviewer. I couldn't quite remember the exact number. I was asked various questions similar to the ones asked in my application form, such as family background and educational background. They were not difficult questions. I think the immigration officials just wanted to see the applicant. They particularly wanted to know why my father and my brothers weren't applying with me.

I was probably a very unusual investor applicant because I was a twenty-five years old, single woman. I was asked a lot about my investment experience. I actually started investing in the equities market since I was eighteen. I brought a copy of my portfolio to show them just in case they asked. It was a U.S.-dollar portfolio and there was an approximate amount of three hundred thousand Canadian dollars in it. The application was approved, and within a year, my visa arrived in the U.S. where I was living. Within two months, I moved to Canada. I would have liked to live in Montreal, but chose Toronto because it is an English city.

As an investor, the entire amount of three hundred thousand Canadian dollars was held for a period of three years. Maybe the Canadian government took the money, put it in bonds or term deposits, and then released it after three years. But, whoever managed the money for investors, that person or persons would be making pure profits! You know, investors were not required to work. I could have chosen to just sit for three years and get my citizenship.

Such are the ever-changing experiences Chinese immigrant women had with the Canadian Department of Immigration.

In closing, one wonders, if it had not been for the political situation in China after the World War II, would the Chinese Canadian communities have remained bachelor societies for much longer? And, if the points system was not instituted so that professional women could immigrate to Canada independently, would we have the strong Chinese Canadian community we have today?