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Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada's Exclusion Era, 1885-1945: A Brief Introduction

By Lisa Rose Mar

Brokering Belonging traces several generations of Chinese Canadian "brokers," the ethnic leaders who acted as intermediaries between the Chinese and Anglo worlds of Canada. Before the Second World War, many Chinese Canadians were illegal immigrants, and most could not vote.[1] Brokers therefore played an informal but necessary role as representatives of their community to the larger society during a period of anti-Asian sentiment and exclusion. Using new Chinese language evidence, my investigation of dramatic power struggles shows how Chinese immigrants became significant players in race relations and had an impact on policies that affected all Canadians and Americans.

Chinese brokers' work offers a transnational perspective on the process of political integration. Most studies of foreign migrants' political integration focus on immigrants who could eventually become citizens.[2] While this was the norm for European immigrants, policies in Canada and the United States did not allow Asian immigrants equal access to voting and naturalization privileges.[3] Chinese brokers' use of power also reflected their roles as representatives of a migrant community that stretched across Canada, China, and the United States. Commonly, immigrant leadership has been conceived as domination of naive new arrivals by English-speaking merchants, labor contractors, interpreters, and professionals.[4] *Brokering Belonging* conceives of transnational migrants' integration into settler societies

in more pluralistic terms: it focuses on the changing political relations between ordinary people, their leaders, and their institutions in the Pacific world.[5]

Canada implemented its first anti-Chinese immigration act in 1885, just as Chinese workers were completing the nation's first transcontinental railway. The first and second generation of brokers, backed by wealthy Chinese merchants, acted as representatives for the disenfranchised, establishing themselves among the community. These traditional brokers prioritized assuring a steady stream of Chinese immigrants. With corrupt or sympathetic partners in Anglo politics and business, the brokers helped many Chinese newcomers to evade anti-Chinese immigration laws. Even the legal route through Canada's borders was tightly controlled by these brokers and their allies in China. To this end, Chinese brokers often secured official immigration interpreter posts by making alliances with ruling party factions and by bribing politicians.[6]

Brokers also merged their Chinese clients' aspirations with British legal institutions. Chinese Canadians contended with laws and a justice system that frequently treated them unfairly. When Chinese appealed to Canadian and British Empire courts to rectify these wrongs, judges often upheld the white majority's right to discriminate against them.[7] Despite these challenges, Chinese Canadians found ways to influence the larger legal culture. Chinese brought from China and the United States strong traditions of litigation, so they often turned to Canadian law to resolve disputes. Because British Columbia did not permit Chinese to practice law, Chinese legal interpreters worked as unofficial "Chinese lawyers" in legal negotiations that often expanded the Canadian state's influence in Chinese Canadian affairs. Chinese in the United States similarly dealt with popular demands for the rule of law and with racial barriers in the legal profession.[8]

Starting in the 1920s, traditional merchant brokers and legal interpreters faced new challenges from a third generation of charismatic brokers: intellectuals, labor leaders, and civil rights activists. The new brokerage was based less on wealth or patron-client relations and more on the active consciousness of thousands of Chinese. These new leaders burst onto the political stage in 1922 with a year-long mass protest movement against public school segregation. While this protest has been regarded as a local Chinese-Anglo conflict, Chinese evidence reveals it to be a transpacific event, rooted in global anti-colonial nationalist movements after the First World War.[9] Anti-segregation leaders alluded to mass protests against British colonialism in China and India. Their efforts also paralleled rising labor unions and campaigns by Chinese Americans. This populism provoked severe backlashes from some Chinese and Anglo business leaders, but the social movement's power to bring ordinary people into brokerage politics could not be undone.[10]

Astute intellectuals among these new brokers also attempted to reshape public discourse about Chinese in Canada and the United States. As the first major academic survey of East Asian immigrants' opinions began in 1924, its director, Robert Park of the University of Chicago, opined that Asians appeared to be more like blacks than whites.[11] Chinese Canadian leaders in Vancouver believed that they could not leave the Survey of Race Relations' outcome to chance, so they coordinated the interview data that researchers would find.[12] Chinese leaders countered Park's assumptions that Asians adapted more slowly than European immigrants by claiming that their own lives heralded Chinese Canadians' future as an educated, assimilated, deferential, and hard-working model minority. Their performance built on and added to nascent U.S.-Canada debates about factoring immigrants into more pluralistic visions of national life, rather than enforcing Anglo conformity.

Chinese in Victoria, Seattle, and San Francisco then did likewise, planting the seeds of enduring immigrant myths in the United States and Canada.[13]

The waning of anti-Chinese laws is often attributed to liberalizing Anglo attitudes and Chinese Canadian lobbying.[14] Brokers' mass protests during the Second World War also contributed. Unpopular war policies put the traditional brokers favored by the Canadian government on the defensive. Charismatic brokers mobilized thousands of Chinese Canadians to combat war policies that made it difficult to send relief remittances to relatives in China. Thousands of Chinese workers also organized within their larger Canadian labor unions, protesting tax regulations and demanding equal pay. These protests pushed reluctant labor unions to combat Anglo racial discrimination just as new industrial relations policies made unions into more powerful political machines than in the past. An anti-conscription movement inspired thousands of Chinese to boycott military service to protest their disenfranchisement. Their protest also built on Canada's larger conscription crisis, which bitterly divided British and French Canadians. This Chinese Canadian action highlights an overlooked dimension of the conscription crisis: a majority of Canada's nonwhite population refused to serve. *Brokering Belonging* ends in 1945, as Chinese Canadians' new alliances began to shift their legal status from aliens to citizens and as the rise of Communist power in China ushered in a new era of Chinese Canadian transpacific relations.[15]

Brokerage relations provide a new lens which transforms common views of a global turn away from unrestricted entry to immigration restriction in the settlement nations of the Americas and the British Empire.[16] This new regime of border controls first focused on Chinese, but it later expanded to encompass all immigrants.[17] Many histories of this transition focus on the gatekeepers and their institutions,[18] a perspective that renders invisible much of Chinese agency and Chinese internal tensions. Chinese brokers' story

points toward another side of this gatekeeping story: its persistent failures. Chinese developed a global system of illegal immigration and secured local political protections that made continued migrations possible. Chinese Canadians achieved a true but unequal political integration. This history brings Chinese connections with the Pacific world back into the center of domestic histories of North America. The official settler story of Canada as a nation of immigrants coincided with an unofficial story of Canada that was written through global migrations at the crossroads of the Pacific, North American, and British worlds.

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[1] The United States made Asian immigrants ineligible for naturalization, whereas in Canada judges used their discretion to keep Chinese immigrants' naturalization rates low. The following Western states and provinces denied persons of Chinese descent the right to vote for various periods of time even if they were native-born or naturalized citizens: British Columbia, Saskatchewan, California, Oregon, and Idaho. Chang, "Asian Americans and Politics," in *Asian Americans and Politics: Perspectives, Experiences, and Prospects*, edited by Gordon Chang. (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2001), 16–18; Harry Con, Ronald J. Con, Graham Johnson, Edgar Wickberg, and William E. Willmott. *From China to Canada: A History of Chinese Communities in Canada*, edited by Edgar Wickberg. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), 45–46, 145; Paul Richard Yee, "Chinese Business in Vancouver, 1886–1914." Master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 1983, 28; Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy toward Orientals in British Columbia* , 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 4; Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in America* (New York: Basic, 2001), 141; Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History.* (Boston: Twayne,1991), 47; Wai-Man Lee,

Portraits of a Challenge: An Illustrated History of Chinese Canadians. (Toronto: Council of Chinese Canadians of Ontario, 1984) 152.

[2] Rubén G. Rumbaut "Assimilation and Its Discontents: Ironies and Paradoxes." In *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience* , edited by Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz, and Josh DeWind, 171–195. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999.

[3] See note 1. Lisa R. Mar "Beyond Being Others: Chinese Canadians as National History." *BC Studies* 156–157 (Winter 2007–Spring 2008): 13–34.

[4] Robert Harney, *If One Were to Write a History: Selected Writings by Robert Harney* ,ed. Pierre Anctil and Bruno Ramirez (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1991); Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1800-1930.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); John Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity,1875–1935.* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988) Carmela Patrias, *Patriots and Proletarians: Politicizing Hungarian Immigrants in Interwar Canada* . (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 1994); John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Raymond Breton, *Governance of Ethnic Communities: Political Structures And Processes in Canada.* (New York: Greenwood, 1991); Victor R. Greene, *American Immigrant Leaders, 1800–1910: Marginality and Identity.* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.) ; John Higham, ed., *Ethnic Leadership in America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) ; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal : Industrial Workers in Chicago,1919–1939.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane* . Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins

University Press, 2006; Kwong, *Chinatown, New York: Labor and Politics, 1930* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980); Renqiu Yu, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Huping Ling, *Chinese St. Louis* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Him Mark Lai, *Becoming Chinese American*. (Lanham, Md.: Alta Mira, 2004).

[5] *Brokering Belonging*'s conception of brokers and brokerage relations was inspired by histories of modern China because few historians of Canada and the United States have fully explored ethnic leadership as a mediating force. I take an anthropological approach, which examines brokers and brokerage as part of an evolving set of social structures. Given shifting historical contexts, brokers' changing and multiple roles cannot be reduced to a single form of dominance or a single theoretical approach. Therefore, I argue in favor of a more complex conception of race relations politics, which focuses on the ongoing construction of immigrants' relationships to both societies. This meeting of different worlds involved social structures that arose from interacting forces: the brokers themselves, ordinary Chinese, and their Canadian allies. I also explore how the brokers' representative power within race relations politics often expressed controversial patterns of dominance rooted both in immigrant and in wider Canadian society. Conceptually, histories of what scholars term China's local elites provide the closest parallels to Chinese Canadian brokerage. The concept of elites in China's local societies covers a wide range of dominant mediating figures who aided ordinary people in their dealings with the state. On "nonofficial" local elites as a central mediating force in modern Chinese history, see Esherick and Rankin's introduction to *Chinese Local Elites*, Joseph W. Esherick, and Mary Backus Rankin, "Introduction," in Esherick and Rankin, eds. *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance*, 1-24. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Melissa Macauley, *Social Power and Legal Culture:*

Litigation Masters in Late Imperial China (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1–17; Bryna Goodman, *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995). See also Eric R. Wolf's theoretical definition of political "cultural brokers" as seeking simultaneous leadership in separate minority and mainstream settings in "Aspects of Group Relations in a Complex Society: Mexico," *American Anthropologist* 58.6 (1956): 1005-1078. Few Canadian studies have explored ethnic leadership's mediating power for nonvoting immigrants with a sophistication comparable to historical studies of China's local elites' relations with the state and the wider society. See Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor* ; Breton, *Governance of Ethnic Communities*, 61–93; Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto*; Patrias, *Patriots and Proletarians*; Robert Harney, "Commerce of Migration" in *If One Were to Write a History* , edited by Pierre Anctil and Bruno Ramirez, 19–36. (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1991.); Robert Harney, "The Padrone and the Immigrant" *Canadian Review of American Studies* 5.2 (1974): 101–118. The U.S. history field's coverage of immigrant political brokerage shares the Canadian focus on the enfranchised. See Evelyn Savidge Sterne, "Beyond the Boss," "Beyond the Boss: Immigration and American Political Culture from 1880 to 1940." in *E Pluribus Unum? Contemporary and Historical Perspectives on Immigrant Political Incorporation* , edited by Gary Gerstle and John Mollenkopf, 33–66. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001).

[6] Lisa Rose Mar, *Brokering Belonging* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15-48.

[7] Constance Backhouse, *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900–1950* . (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, 1999) 3–17. See also Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875–1980* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991) 8–33, on policies that expressed Anglo cultural hegemony over Chinese.

[8] Mar, *Brokering Belonging*, 49-68.

[9] Mary Ashworth, *The Forces Which Shaped Them: A History of Education of Minority Group Children in British Columbia* . Vancouver: New Star, 1979. , 75–82; David Chuenyan Lai, "The Issue of Discrimination in Education in Victoria, 1901–1923." *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 19.3 (1987): 47–67; Paul Yee, *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of Chinese in Vancouver.* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1988) 52–53; Timothy J. Stanley, "White Supremacy, Chinese Schooling, and School Segregation in Victoria: The Case of the Chinese Students' Strike, 1922–1923." *Historical Studies in Education* 2.2 (1990): 287–305; Stanley, "Bringing Anti-Racism into Historical Explanation. The Victoria Chinese Students' Strike of 1922–3 Revisited." *Canadian Historical Association Journal* 13 (2002): 141–165. Erez Manela describes the backdrop, a global trend of anti-colonial nationalism, in *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the Origins of Anti-Colonial Nationalism.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[10] Mar, *Brokering Belonging*, 69-88.

[11] Chuichi Ohashi of Japanese Consulate, San Francisco, Letter to Merle Davis, box 14, file 14-11, Survey of Race Relations Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, California (hereafter abbreviated as SRR). Park stated this opinion in a Japanese-language newspaper. Many well-educated Chinese could read Japanese, and news traveled quickly across the West Coast's tightly networked Chinese communities.

[12] *Dahan Gongbao* newspaper (hereafter abbreviated as *DHGB)*, 14 Feb.1924; Raushenbush, British Columbia Major Documents, box 24, files 24-1 through 24-35, SRR.

[13] Subsequent Chinese interviews in Seattle and San Francisco revealed parallel patterns of researcher management and selective information. Vancouver's Chinese newspapers circulated there. See C.H. Burnett, Seattle Chinese interviews major documents, box 27,

folders 24-:18, 27, 33–34, 36–50. SRR; Winifred Raushenbush, "Their Place in the Sun.: Japanese Farmers Nine Years After the Land Laws." *Survey Graphic* 56 (1 May 1926), 141-145, 203; Raushenbush, "The Great Wall of Chinatown: How the Chinese Mind Their Own Business behind It," *Survey Graphic* 56 (1 May 1926), 154–158, 221; Jon Gjerde, "New Growth on Old Vines—The State of the Field: The Social History of Immigration to and Ethnicity in the United States." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 18.4 (1999): 40–65. The impact of the Chicago School and the survey is especially marked in the fields of Asian Canadian and Asian American studies; see its most conceptually influential historical text, Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore* (Boston: Back Bay, 1998). In *Thinking Orientals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Henry Yu documents that the Chicago School had a long-term impact on geography, sociology, social psychology, history, and Asian American studies, "where repudiation covers a long-standing appropriation," 186–197. Canadian historians explored the influence of the Chicago School on the development of immigration sociology starting at McGill University in the 1930s, but the survey's impact suggests an earlier West Coast starting point. See Marlene Shore, *The Science of Social Redemption: McGill, the Chicago School, and the Origins of Social Research in Canada. (*Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Thomas Palantzas, "A Chicago Reprise in the Champagne Years of Canadian Sociology, 1935-1964." Master's thesis, Lakehead University, 1994; and Mar, *Brokering Belonging*, 89-110.

[14] Patricia E. Roy, *The Triumph of Citizenship: The Chinese and Japanese in Canada, 1941–67* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007*)* 148–185; Anthony Chan, *Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World* . Vancouver: New Star, 1988, 145–147; Peter S. Li, *The Chinese in Canada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 90–91; Yee, *Saltwater City*, 105 ; Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada's Second World War* (Vancouver:

University of British Columbia Press, 2004) 3–4; Con et al., *From China to Canada* , 198–201; K. Scott Wong, *Americans First: Chinese Americans and the Second World War. (*Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); Lisa Rose Mar, "From Diaspora to North American Civil Rights: Chinese Canadian Ideas, Identities and Brokers in Vancouver, British Columbia, 1924–1960." Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2002; Judy Maxwell, "A Cause Worth Fighting For: Chinese Canadians Debate Their Participation in the Second World War." Master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 2005; Carol F. Lee, "The Road to Enfranchisement: Chinese and Japanese in British Columbia." *BC Studies* 30 (Summer 1976): 44–76; Mar, "Beyond Being Others," 15, 24–34.

[15] Mar, *Brokering Belonging*, 111-130.

[16] On the globalized anti-Chinese gatekeeping, see Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders. (*New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Erika Lee, "Hemispheric Orientalism and the 1907 Pacific Coast Race Riots." *Amerasia Journal* 33.2 (2007): 19–47.

[17] Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* . Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. 1–18.

[18] Examples of gatekeeping histories, in Canada: Ward, *White Canada Forever*; Patricia E. Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858–1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989), Patricia E. Roy, *The Oriental Question: Consolidating a White Man's Province,1914–1941*. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003); Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown*; Denise Helly, *Les Chinois à Montréal, 1877–1951* (Quebec: Institut Québécois de Recherche sur la Culture, 1987); and in the United States: Lee, *At America's Gates*.