

"Sex, Intimacy, and Desire among Men of Chinese Heritage and Women of Non-Asian Heritage in Toronto, 1910-1950." *Urban History Review* 42, no. 2 (Spring, 2014): 29-59

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The "Bachelor" Myth

Myth: Men of Chinese heritage in Toronto (1910-1950) were celibate "bachelors"

Fact: Wives and children were forced to stay back in China due to restrictive, anti-Chinese immigration laws

New Information: Men enjoyed a variety of intimate relationships with "Canadian-born and immigrant women of non-Asian heritage" (whether they had a wife in their birth country or not)

Where Did This Myth Come From?

Previously, scholars excluded these relationships due to assumptions about racism and its influence on interracial relationships

Myth: The threat and power of racism in Canada meant that white women would be hesitant to engage in intimacy with men of Chinese heritage

Fact: This was simply not true

New Information: The study of emotions and "felt experience" in the field of migration and sexuality provided a different lens with which to view people of Chinese heritage and their personal stories regarding intimacy and relationships. This opened up new ways of viewing interracial relationships.



Types of Relationships:

- Included marriage, common-law partnership, companionship, clients of sex workers
- These women were often working-class
- From a variety of backgrounds: "Ontario-Born, British heritage, Irish, Italian, Russian, American, and French Canadian"
- Men of Chinese heritage offered a domestic partnership within these relationships
- They cooked meals, opened up their homes and cupboards, and took care of their partners
- Many women felt they were better treated by men of Chinese heritage than white men
- Sex workers are often excluded from history, but are hugely important in this story
- Sex workers became prominent figures in communities
- Many "came to be considered family," or became family through marriage
- Mavis Chu and her Auntie Joan were an example of this (see photo above)

Courtship & Meeting Places:

- A bigger dating culture emerged as Toronto grew and expanded
- Men of Chinese heritage were excluded from popular meeting places such as roller rinks and dance halls
- During the 1920s, more Chinese-run restaurants opened
- These restaurants were inexpensive, which attracted many young working-class women
- As a result, many relationships developed there

Anti-Chinese Racism in Canada from 1910-1950:

- The Chinese Head Tax
- Fears around mixed-race relationships,
- Negative media representation
- The 1923 *Chinese Exclusion Act*
- Harmful stereotypes about men of Chinese heritage as “sexually dangerous” towards white women

“Act to Amend the Factory, Shop and Office Building Act” (1914)

- Forbid Chinese people to hire white women at their businesses due to the fears mentioned above
- It also worked to undercut Chinese Canadian businesses.
- White women who were employed in Chinese-run businesses felt they were treated better, paid well, and respected more by their bosses than in white establishments



Figure 1. Chu Yat Bo / Harry Chu, Toronto, 1920s. Mavis Chu's personal photo archives.

Consequences for Couples:

- These relationships were treated with suspicion by the public
- The “morality police” had the power to arrest any woman seen in Chinese restaurants or out with men of Chinese heritage
- A woman who married adopted her husband’s nationality and lost her “status as a British subject” within Canada
- When a wife took her husband’s last name, she had to consider hiding it or using a different name because she could lose out on work opportunities due to racism
- When Eileen Neeson left her husband to marry her long-time love, Harry Chu (pictured above), her ex-husband took custody of her two children
- Because she chose to build a life with a man of Chinese heritage, Eileen was unable to fight her husband for custody of her twins
- Men of Chinese heritage dealt daily with racism and harassment as well as “oppression on the job market and in the education system”

Community:

- Many people within the lives of these couples welcomed these relationships and included men of Chinese heritage and women of non-Asian heritage in their communities
- Many couples provided boarding in their houses to earn income
- This led to many sex workers coming and going
- These women became a part of everyday life for these families and lifelong friendships developed out of these interactions.
- These intimate bonds built a community where everyone looked out for each other
- Tom Lock, a Chinese owner of a pharmacy, would stock “condoms and aphrodisiacs” which sex workers would purchase in large amounts
- Sex workers started bringing clients to Chinese-run restaurants, which helped these establishments flourish

A New Perspective:

- When assessing these relationships and interactions in the present, it is important not to project past views of racism onto them
- It essential to understand the ways racism effected interracial relationships to better understand the mindset of Canadian society from 1910-1950
- By separating these ideas, we can get to the truth and help to uncover history that was previously ignored