

Sex, Intimacy, and Desire among Men of Chinese Heritage and Women of Non-Asian Heritage in Toronto, 1910-1950

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“Whenever we put sex at the centre of our historical vision, our understanding of the past changes.”

Snapshot

Historiography often portrays men of Chinese heritage in twentieth century Canada as bachelors who lived lonely, celibate lives. Chenier counters this portrayal by arguing that they frequently engaged in relationships with women of white heritage and sex-workers.

Glossary

Incorrigibility laws: Laws that allowed the incarceration of unmarried women ages 15-34 for charges like promiscuity, pregnancy out of wedlock, and drunkenness.¹

Morality officers: Established in the 1880s with the intention of policing women and children.²

Bawdy house: A synonym for brothel. A place where people engage the services of sex-workers.

1. CBC, “Jailed as ‘incorrigible’ 60 years ago, woman wants compensation,” published October 7, 2002, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/jailed-as-incorrigible-60-years-ago-woman-wants-compensation-1.322439>.
2. CBC, “A look at the 1920s laws you may be breaking every day,” published October 15, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/television/a-look-at-the-1920s-laws-you-may-be-breaking-every-day-1.5261147#:~:text=What%20is%20a%20morality%20officer,Liddiard%2C%20who%20plays%20Mary%20Shaw>.

Social Context

- Early twentieth century English Protestant Canadians valued ‘racial purity,’ and discouraged inter-racial couples.
- Widespread fear about the sexual vulnerability of women of white heritage in the presence of men of Chinese heritage, which was further promoted in media and throughout society.
- Some believed that women of white heritage who went to Chinatown were “innocent victims of rapacious Oriental lust,” or they were hypnotized by “the ‘mysterious Chinese.’”

“[A] significant number of non-Asian Torontonians viewed the Co-mingling of women of white and men of Chinese heritage as sexually and morally dangerous and socially deviant.”

Negotiating the heterosocial world

- In the early twentieth century, men of Chinese heritage’s experience of heterosexuality was similar to men of white heritage. Indeed, they had sex, dated, and fell in love.
- However, racism limited the settings in which men of Chinese heritage were not able to experience heterosexual culture. Due to racism, they were unable to “access the rich heterosocial culture that blossomed in and around roller rinks, vaudeville and movie theatres, and dance halls.”
- Instead, men of Chinese heritage often interacted with women of white heritage in restaurants.
- In 1917, Toronto had thirty two restaurants run by men of Chinese heritage
- In 1928, Toronto had 202 restaurants run by men of Chinese heritage
- These restaurants were affordable, which appealed to working-class women of white heritage because they were payed low wages.
- “Women who partnered with men of Chinese heritage were typically young and working class.”
- In 1911, Toronto had 63,013 ‘working girls,’ with an average annual pay of \$667.
- Women working in industrial sectors were payed approximately nine to fifteen dollars per week, and had an average annual pay of \$578.
- According to calculations by the Ontario Department of Labour, in 1919 the minimum cost of living for wage-earning women was approximately six or seven dollars per week.
- As such, many young working-class women frequented the affordable restaurants run by men of Chinese heritage.
- Francophone women earned lower wages than Anglophone women, which likely lead them to eat at restaurants run by men of Chinese heritage. Furthermore, men of Chinese heritage tended to be less discriminatory towards french-speaking Catholics.
- Women of white heritage also worked in these restaurants. However, due to social stigma, “women who worked in Chinese restaurants were assumed to be prostitutes.”

Legislation

- The 1897 Ontario Female Refuges Act (OFRA) and the 1908 Juvenile Delinquents Act (JDA) introduced incorrigibility laws that policed the sexual morality of women.
- On May first, 1914, parliament voted to amend the Factory, Shop and Office Building Act, making it illegal for men of Chinese heritage to hire women of white heritage. However, the act was not thoroughly enforced until 1928.

Resistance

- In 1928, the Mayor of Toronto enforced the 1914 amendment to the Factory, Shop and Office Building Act. “He gave men of Chinese heritage ‘a week or ten days ... to get rid of their white women employees,’” threatening arrest if they did not comply. In response, eighty women of white heritage employed by men of Chinese heritage, signed a petition to abolish the law.
- Morality officers often intimidated women seen fraternizing with men of Chinese heritage by threatening to arrest them.
- Some women did not succumb to the intimidation. In 1943 a woman of white heritage was charged with vagrancy for spending time with a man of Chinese heritage. In court, the arresting officer testified that the woman resisted intimidation, saying “[s]he told me it was none of my business what she was doing.”

Gender Roles and Marriage

- According to oral histories, women of white heritage in relationships with men of Chinese heritage were often treated better than if they were with a man of white heritage.
- Because dating a man of Chinese heritage was stigmatized, these men “had to cede some authority, become less patriarchal, and provide for [women] in ways non-Asian men would never dream of doing” to “keep the interest of women of white heritage.”
- However, in some marriages between men of Chinese heritage and women of white heritage, gender roles would often resemble that of a traditional twentieth century white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant relationships once married because men of Chinese heritage no longer felt they needed to incentivize women of white heritage to stay with them (as is explained in an oral testimony by Mavis Chu).
- Records show that most women of white heritage who married men of Chinese heritage were between the ages of eighteen and twenty.
- Marriage offered women an escape from incorrigibility laws, but it also meant the loss of their Canadian citizenship. Canadian marriage law said that when women married, they took on their husband’s nationality. However, the Chinese government did not grant citizenship to the Canadian wives of men of Chinese heritage.
- Women of white heritage married to men of Chinese heritage were often assumed to be sex-workers, and were persecuted as such.
- Many couples united in common-law marriages to avoid social and legal consequences of traditional marriage.
- In some instances, common law marriages “the women knew their partners had a wife in China and did not want to marry them.”

“From a Chinese cultural perspective, marriage was a contract between families and was validated by communities, not state agents. Before the 1950s it was rare for rural people to register marriage with the local police or any other government agency.”

Poor women of white heritage entered relationships with men of Chinese heritage for many reasons. Sometimes women of white heritage were “looking for food, shelter, money and kindness which their own race [refused] them.”

Sex-Workers

- In the early twentieth century, sex-workers were an important part of Toronto’s Chinatown. They boosted the economy by attracting people to restaurants and hotels owned by people of Chinese heritage.
- Marriages between sex-workers and men of Chinese heritage were not uncommon.
- There is evidence of married couples participating in the sex-work industry together. Indeed, there are accounts of couples “jointly charged with running bawdy house operations.”

“Treating sex workers as if they matter and acknowledging bachelors’ need and desire for sex and intimacy is not something most historians are trained to do.”

Closing Thoughts

Why is reframing history to acknowledge the sexuality of men of Chinese heritage important?

- Racism in early twentieth century Toronto shaped the way men of Chinese heritage navigated gender and sexuality by limiting the spaces in which they could participate in the heterosocial world.
- It shows how racism diminished the authority of men of Chinese heritage, which benefited women of white heritage (during the dating stage).
- It acknowledges the significance of sex-workers, a group that are typically ignored in historiography.
- Recognizes the agency of men of Chinese heritage, women, and sex-workers.
- Shows how men of Chinese heritage and women of white heritage created a “unique and dynamic heterosexual culture and family life experience.”

Bibliography

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