

# “I Would Give Her Even My Bones”: Mixed-Heritage Relationships in Twentieth-Century Toronto

**Aidan T.** Factsheet drawing from Elise Chenier (2014) “Sex, Intimacy, and Desire Among Men of Chinese Heritage and Women of Non-Asian Heritage in Toronto, 1910-1950,” in *Urban History Review*

## Key Terms

**Heterosexualization:** The process that normalized male-female sexual relationships based on attraction and pleasure rather than procreation. Heterosexualization and commercialization redefined socialization, emphasizing courtship dating in heterosocial spaces.

**Racialization:** The process through which perceived physical characteristics are given social meanings that distinguish groups as part of a “race.” These meanings are socially constructed and define groups as different from the dominant group in order to exclude them.

**Moral reform movements:** Campaigns led by non-state volunteer organizations to encourage Christian and Eurocentric morality through petitions for increased legislation, the establishment of homes and reformatories for youth, and missionary activity. Reform movements were often racist, labelling people of non-white heritage as moral impure and in need of correction or separation from white society.

**Chinese head tax:** A fee applied to all people of Chinese heritage who entered Canada. First introduced through the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885 at \$50, it steadily increased until 1903, when it reached \$500.

## Introduction

- Elise Chenier dismantles myths about Chinese male celibacy by examining their mixed-heritage relationships with white women in twentieth century Toronto.
- Because few of these people left no journals or sources, Chenier draws on the oral testimonies of their children.
- These relationships took a variety of forms, transgressing and challenging the racialized hierarchies and policies established in white Canadian society.
- Despite attempts disrupt these relationships, they flourished in Toronto’s heterosocial environment
- Focusing on these relationships combats the segregation indirectly reinforced by scholarship that overlooks such resistance to racist social policies.

## Legislative History

- The Canadian state pursued the goal of creating a white, Christian nation grounded in British political and cultural traditions by restricting immigration from outside Europe.
- Legislators primarily targeted Chinese immigration through the imposition of increasingly harsh **head taxes** on incoming workers and the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act, which strictly banned all immigration from China.
- Many men immigrating from China did so with the intent to eventually move back after accumulating wealth. This practice and the intensifying restrictions on immigration discouraged women of Chinese heritage from immigrating to Canada
- The absence of women of Chinese heritage resulted in a widely-held idea of Chinese male communities as “bachelor societies.” This implied celibacy, according to Chenier, is a “poignant marker of how racism affected them at the most intimate level of existence,” serving as a reminder of their unequal status and the opposition of White Canadians to their immigration (31).

## Moving Beyond the Legislative History

- While communities of Chinese heritage were predominantly male, this is not enough evidence to ascribe to men of Chinese heritage a loveless life devoid of sexual encounters or companionship.
- This interpretation relies on a view of “racism so pervasive that we assume few people of white heritage would form relationships with people of Chinese heritage” (40).
- By focusing on individual narratives and emotional histories, Chenier shows that mixed-heritage relationships were more common than had been assumed.
- Chenier’s work shows that men of Chinese heritage and white women negotiated with and found love despite the dominance of racism among white Canadians.

## Historical Context

**Racialization** and **heterosexualization** defined Toronto’s social world in the early twentieth century. White Canadians in this period were increasingly hostile towards people of Asian heritage. These attitudes resulted in the widespread exclusion of people of non-white heritage from the burgeoning heterosocial environment of various venues where working youth met members of different sexes. White Canadians encouraged this exclusion because they were aware of the potential for mixed-heritage relationships. White feminist and **moral reform movements** were two groups most concerned about these relationships. Fears about the increased sexual activity among young working women joined racist and unfounded notions about men of Chinese heritage’s supposed immorality and sexual danger to make women who consorted within this community especially immoral in the eyes of many white Canadians.

## “Protection”

Many white Canadians held these racist views and marshalled them to enforce social and legal regimes of “racial purity.” Under the guise of “protecting” white women, efforts to disrupt mixed-heritage relationships harmed these women significantly

## Legislation

- In 1927, it was made illegal for Chinese-owned businesses to employ white women in Ontario. This legislation intended to harm these businesses and restrict white women’s contact with men of Chinese heritage.
- This law was predicated on unsubstantiated and racist stereotypes about the sexual immorality of men of Chinese heritage.
- Many white women rejected such stereotypes, stating that men of Chinese heritage were more polite than white men.
- Others resisted the law for restricting their freedom to choose employment and highlighted the better pay in Chinatown restaurants than at businesses owned by white people or other racialized groups.

## Policing and “Racial Purity”

- Chenier argues that “morality officers imposed the racialized values of the settler colonial state by discouraging women from consorting with men of Asian heritage” (35).
- Police threatened women with arrest if they refused to leave their non-white partners and arrested them when they refused these demands.
- The most common charges were incorrigibility (disobeying their parents) and prostitution, even when these women were married to the men they were with.
- Often, these charges were encouraged by the parents of white women, reporting their own daughters to the police for consorting with men of Chinese heritage.

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## Ostracization From White Society

- Many white parents disavowed daughters who dated men of Chinese heritage.
- Even marriage, seen as an “escape from parental and state control,” harmed white women’s reputation and lost them job opportunities due to the stigma of having a Chinese surname (35).
- Married women were required to assume their husband’s nationality. Unable to get a Chinese passport, many women married to men of Chinese heritage were left stateless.
- Some women lost custody of their children from previous relationships after partnering with men of Chinese heritage.
- Because of this ostracization, these women “lived their lives and raised their children without the benefit of kinship or friendship networks” (37). This ostracization displays how prevalent racism was despite some resisting racialized segregation.

## Despite the risks, relationships between white women and men of Chinese heritage flourished.

- Eighty-five of these men (3.35% of their 1935 Toronto population) married white women.
- Up to 800 (31.3%) were in long-term common-law relationships, living with white women.
- Many more engaged in short-term companionate or sexual relationships.

## White women engaged in mixed-heritage relationships for various reasons.

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### Immigration and Ethnic Identity

- Most women who formed intimate ties with men of Chinese heritage were young working women, often of immigrant or francophone backgrounds.
- These women were usually close to Chinese heritage communities, finding employment and social space in Chinese-owned businesses.
- In these spaces, men of Chinese heritage could access the heterosocial world with diminished threats of racialized segregation, insults, or violence.
- The shared, if not identical, experiences of discrimination between these women and men of Chinese heritage may have made these white women “more willing to transgress the social prohibition against interracial sociality with people of Chinese heritage” (34).

### Financial Factors

- Key to dating and sex in the period was the negotiation of payment and gifts.
- Men of Chinese heritage were described by white women as generous. These men gave their partners gifts, bought dinners, and offered shelter.
- Sex workers were relatively common and often (though not always) welcomed in Chinese male communities for providing intimacy and bringing in business.
- Others, known as “consent girls,” occasionally exchanged sex for gifts, food, money, and shelter.
- Many historians have ignored the presence of sex workers and consent girls in Chinese male communities because many white Canadians, then and now, considered them disreputable.
- We should view these women as they and their partners and clients did. They deserve respect and dignity for fulfilling important economic and social roles.

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## Emotional and Domestic Factors

- Because many men of Chinese heritage had previously lived without women to perform domestic labour, they were already taking care of tasks like cooking and cleaning themselves. They often continued to do this work after finding white partners, making them dinners and offering unrestricted access to their homes without expecting domestic labour in return.
- The autonomy that these men extended to their white partners made it possible for these women to date additional men. This freedom increased these women’s participation in the heterosocial environment, likely gaining gifts and financial benefits from multiple men at once.
- Chenier argues that these men did this work to attract white women despite racism and the risks of mixed-heritage relationships. However, we do not know these men’s motivations. All we can tell is that white women found loving, caring relationships with men offered domestic and emotional support.

## Conclusion

Chenier’s work shows that the idea of Chinese male celibacy is an inference based on the legislative exclusion of women of Chinese heritage. Men of Chinese and women of white heritage regularly socialized in Toronto’s heterosocial environment. These relationships took a variety of forms, from short-term sexual encounters to companionate dating involving economic exchange and even marriage and children. The burgeoning dating and heterosexual culture of Toronto permitted and encouraged these relationships based on financial and emotional factors.

Ultimately, mixed-heritage relationships formed for a number of reasons. Many of these reasons cannot be described in rational terms that reduce complex emotional lives to exchanges of labour or goods. Within the narratives of these women and their children, a picture emerges of struggle against the damage caused by racism, but also of love, passion, and care. These men and women chose to date, have sex, and fall in love. In the act of choosing love, they also resisted the racialization and exclusion of people of Chinese heritage.

## Bibliography

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