

Anti-Chinese Racism and the Structure of White Supremacy: An Anti-Essentialist Antiracist Perspective on Canadian History

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The History of Anti-Chinese Racism

- From its inception in the mid-nineteenth century, the settler colonial project of British Columbia centered on the creation of white minority rule
- At that time, Indigenous Peoples were the overwhelming majority of the population, while Chinese people were the second largest group
- After BC joined Canada in 1871, the first acts of the British Columbia legislature excluded Chinese people from the emerging state system. The system did not document their births, marriages, and deaths
- The 1875 Qualification and Registration of Voters Act of legislature barred Chinese people from voting
- After the federal reserve system marginalized First Nations peoples on tiny plots of land, the federal government allowed settler to claim the land. Provincial land laws effectively barred Chinese people from this land
- Settlers from Great Britain and Eastern Canada did not exclude Chinese people in British Columbia because they were culturally different. Many of Chinese people were British subjects, either from Hong Kong or naturalized. Some Chinese merchants and holders of mining licences voted in the first post-Confederation elections and by-elections. They also participated in the public life of the territory, campaigning to establish a hospital in Victoria
- The settlers required clear lines between the colonizers and the colonized, in order to ensure the dominance of people from Britain and of their locally-born descendants

The Creation of Anti-Chinese Exclusion

- The first Prime Minister of Canada, Sir John MacDonald, excluded people of the “Mongolian or Chinese race” from the federal policy in the 1885 federal Electoral Franchise Act. He was fearful that Chinese property owners would control the vote in British Columbia and thus threaten the control of Europeans
- He warned the House of Commons that the Chinese people were not only aliens, but that their presence in Canada would put at risk “the Aryan nature of the future of British America”
- Although he had strong opponents in the House, his actions fixed in law the idea that Chinese people are not Canadian, and he anchored this idea in biology

How Does Racism Work?

- Myriad differences distinguish individual human beings and social groups from each other, but racism selects and attaches significance to phenotypical (physical) or cultural differences
- **One group is racialized in relation to another** through cultural representations that render these differences as absolutes, supposedly characterizing all members of each group
- Any difference can be racialized: skin colour, national or ethnic origin, religion, language, cultural practices, and even height. Furthermore, the differences being racialized do not have to be real, just sustainably imagined
- **Racisms take racializations and organize them into exclusions.** There are many kinds of racialized exclusions: institutional, symbolic, territorial, social, economic, political, and cultural
- Although created deliberately, over time the resulting pattern of exclusion can become normalized
- The consequent structuring of social experience insulates members of the dominant group from the lived consequences of being excluded. Those who dominate do not need to engage with dominated people, and thus don’t learn the cost of their dominance
- Once the exclusion becomes nearly complete, even the knowledge of domination disappears for members of the dominant group; for them, actions that enact exclusion become naturalized
- To be considered racism, **a racialized exclusion needs to have negative consequences for the racialized and excluded.** For this reason, it is important to take seriously and engage directly with what those being excluded say about their experiences



“Chinese” or “Chinamen” - A White Supremacist Fantasy -

- People who migrated to British Columbia from Guangdong province in South China during the nineteenth century were labelled “Chinese.” This, however, was an identity created and ascribed to them by European settlers
- The migrants themselves had a little sense of being Chinese. Instead, they were subjects of the Qing Empire, primarily defining themselves in terms of their home country and clan origins. Many were not ethnic Chinese
- The migrants shared no common language, speaking four mutually unintelligible dialects of Cantonese as well as Hakka
- “People of Tang,” referred to Cantonese-speaking people from south China, whereas “people of Han” were their northern counterparts. Those literate in the Chinese language called themselves “Chinese,” yet in the nineteenth century this term didn’t refer to a political category and it also included people in Korea and Vietnam
- Despite the group’s diversity, the 1885 Royal Commission of Chinese Immigration was devoted to identifying “the Characteristics of the Chinese”
- The racialized invention of “the Chinese” was created in relation to an equally racialized category, sometimes called “whites” but often “British,” “Canadian,” and “British Columbian”

Chinese Historical Sources on Peoples Life Experiences

- Unfortunately, many relevant documents and newspapers were not preserved. However, we do have a Chinese newspaper from the turn of the twentieth century (*Tai Hong Kung Pao The Chinese Times*) and three hundred letters preserved by Vancouver’s Yip family
- Historical sources from the nineteenth century confirm that being called “Chinese” was an ascription, and that these groups did not identify themselves in this way
- These sources also show the emergence of Chinese nationalism in response to racist exclusion. This occurred toward the end of the nineteenth century in overseas communities including Canada, followed by China in the twentieth-century
- In the early twentieth century, *Tai Hong Kung Pao The Chinese Times* actively reported on discrimination and violence against Chinese people, and on white supremacists advocating for Chinese exclusion
- Those racialized as Chinese had their opportunities severely limited: the government restricted their civil and political rights and controlled where and with whom they could work
- Chinese communities in Canada became an archipelago surrounded by hostile whites
- The letters in the Yip Sang family recorded the everyday realities of Chinese workers: their constant search for work, the loss of family members, ways to circumvent racist immigration, and the loneliness of “bachelor workers” whose family members were trapped in China by Canada’s restrictions
- These sources show the continuities of culture, politics, and daily life between China and Canada; there were no neatly-drawn boundaries between Chinese and Canadian history
- These sources also demonstrate that those racialized as Chinese were active players in the creation of Canada. For example, during the 1910s and early 1920s, second-, third-, and fourth-generation Chinese people in British Columbia contested their exclusion during the Victoria Student Strikes. These students brought forth their new identities and challenged racialized binaries. In a white supremacist world that said you could be either Chinese or Canadian, they called themselves Chinese Canadians for the first time

Racism and Ongoing Exclusion of Chinese Canadians

- In Canada, **racism is most often represented as an individual attitude**. Such attitudes are excused as being unfortunate aspects of the times, as the product of an innate fear of strangers, or as an inevitable consequence of supposedly unbridgeable cultural or phenotypical differences
- Individualizing racism glosses over the systems that organize it. **Racisms are social structures** based on racial exclusions
- Racist prejudices are directed at specific groups who have been historically racialized and excluded; racism is learned after years of compulsory government-controlled schooling; political and social systems enable certain people to act out their harmful intentions
- When reporting discrimination, Chinese Canadians conveyed that their bodies were read in racializing ways against a cultural landscape that is the product of European settler colonialism. **Cultural landscape** includes signs, symbols, languages, monuments, building designs, as well as the narratives that circulate in popular culture
- Racist exclusion is seen in the treatment of the Chinese language. Although it has been written and many Chinese languages have been spoken since before the country existed, Chinese is still considered a foreign language and is consequently rarely taught in public schools and/or universities
- Exclusion is also built into the practices of history as a discipline. If you cannot access sources in another language, a simple solution is to collaborate with someone who has the necessary literacy. But, as historians rarely collaborate in co-authored or multi-authored works, they must still rely on English and French-language sources. These can only describe events through the lens of the dominant groups, perpetuating racist exclusions

Anti-essentialist Antiracism Theory and How to Apply It

- Racisms have no essential form
- There are many different racisms; each has its own history and consequences. As racism depends on the context, no one racism can stand for all the others
- all racisms meet three conditions: racialization, organizing racializations into exclusions, and the enactment of negative consequences on the excluded
- To understand how racisms shape the past, historians first need to understand how racisms shape the present. Understanding contemporary realities leads us to question when and how these realities came into existence. Such understanding also leads to critical engagement with the available sources and an inquiry into how racism shaped the availability of these sources
- Overcoming exclusions involves respectfully and ethically engaging with the voices of racialized and excluded people, and bringing their realities and the consequences of their exclusion into the broader, public knowledge
- Canadian dominant historical sources must be in turn re-read. Anti-essentialist antiracism can help historians break through this structuring to document the process at work and show its consequences
- The new, antiracist history aims to replace racialized exclusions with deracialized inclusions**



References:
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