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Canada: A Country for All?

An Alternative Epistemology

Abstract

Canada, a Country for All? is a piece that merges fact, testimony and illustration to tell the story of Chinese immigration to Canada.

Keywords: Chinese immigration to Canada, Canadian immigration policy, generational storytelling

Résumé

Canada, a Country for All ? est un texte qui incorpore les faits aux témoignages et illustrations afin de conter l'histoire de l'immigration chinoise au Canada.

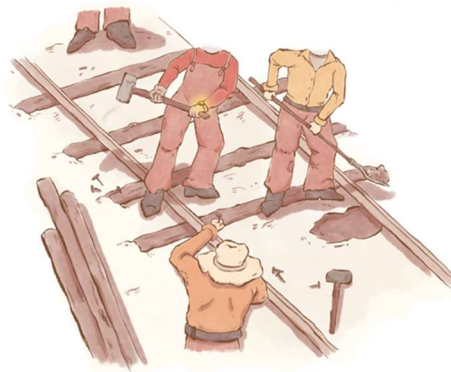
Mots clés : immigration chinoise canadienne, politique d'immigration canadienne, conte d'histoires générationnels



How It Began

Initial waves of Chinese immigrants came to Canada to lend their labour to the Canadian Pacific Railway's construction efforts. 15 000 Chinese contract workers performed dangerous tasks as they helped fulfill the North American nation's vision of having a connection that spanned from coast to coast

(Lavallé, 2008). For their efforts, they were only paid \$1.00 a day (Oziewicz, 1983). Chinese labourers were doing Canadian locals a favour by taking on the burden of extreme labour conditions associated with the railway's assembly.



The Chinese Immigration Act

Despite the Chinese having proven to be strong contributors to the creation of a unified nation, in 1885, the Canadian federal government imposed the Chinese Immigration Act, also known as the Chinese head tax. The original implementation of this tax required a payment of \$50.00 per Chinese person who entered the country (Alphonso, 2000). That is quite the hefty payment for the late 1800s, but that value only continued to grow. In 1900, the government began demanding \$100.00 per person, and by 1903 the price to live in Canada as a Chinese person had risen exponentially to \$500.00 per person (*The Chinese*, n.d.). Thus, those in power quickly forgot the sacrifices of Chinese workers and actively chose to make their entrance into the country as difficult as possible.

The Chinese Exclusion Act

The efforts to prevent Chinese immigration did not end there; rather, governmental figures continued to press for stricter laws. This included another version of the Chinese Immigration Act put forth in 1923. This iteration is commonly referred to as the Chinese Exclusion Act because of its rigid nature. It excluded all Chinese people from entering the country, with very few exceptions (Dyzenhaus and Moran, eds. 2005, p. 7). During this 24-year ban, only students, merchants and diplomats were allowed to enter the country (Chan, 2017). This strictness is reflected in that only 44 Chinese people entered Canada within the 24-year period (see the Chinese Immigration Act, 1923, otherwise known as the Chinese Exclusion Act).



The Laws Are Finally Gone

Though the Canadian government had removed all its discriminatory frameworks, discrimination against those of Chinese descent living in Canada continued to take shape. Discrimination now manifested socially rather than judicially. Dangerous stereotypes have made their way into common social practice. For instance, Chinese folks were often portrayed as *sojourners*. The stereotype painted the Chinese as only coming to Canada to get rich and then to bring it all back to their homeland (Baureiss, 1987, p. 8). This paints the entire population as self-interested and unwilling to integrate fully with their new surroundings. As with any stereotype, this can be highly harmful to a group that is already under government scrutiny. Additionally, early Canadian media depicted the Chinese as gamblers, thieves, and insensitive (Baureiss, 1987, p. 9). Evidently, these stereotypes do not show them in a positive light, and they contradict “Canadian values.”



Why Do I Care?

My mother's family immigrated from China in the late 1950s. Luckily, Canada's discriminatory legislature had mostly been removed at that point. Realistically, had they chosen to immigrate a few years earlier, their family may have been separated due to the immense financial burden. Yet, the real overhaul of Canada's immigration system did not occur until 1967 (*The Chinese*, n.d.). Moreover, the lifting of these detrimental laws allowed my mother to be raised in Canada, where she has created a sustainable life for herself and her family. In a parallel universe, the circumstances may have created a very different outcome. This is not to say that she avoided discrimination, but she avoided it from the country's governing body.



Why Should You Care?

The chances are, if you live in Canada, either you or a family member have immigrated. Generations of immigrants have faced all kinds of barriers. Canada has a long-standing tendency of promoting itself as a nation where people of all ethnic backgrounds are welcome, where they are given an opportunity to

thrive. While some groups may have a positive immigration experience when coming to Canada, it is still vital to remember the history of the communities that did not receive preferable treatment upon their arrival.

A Better Future for Immigrants

It is now more important than ever to ensure that immigrants are respected, valued, and treated like fully-fledged Canadians. Canadian immigration continues to increase, and now the pressure has shifted to current Canadians to uphold values of inclusion. The systems of prejudice need to be confronted and changed for the better. We all deserve to feel welcome and at home in our cities and in our country.



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