Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada’s Exclusion Era, 1885-1945: A Brief Introduction

By Lisa Rose Mar

Brokering Belonging traces several generations of Chinese Canadian “brokers,” the ethnic leaders who acted as intermediaries between the Chinese and Anglo worlds of Canada. Before the Second World War, many Chinese Canadians were illegal immigrants, and most could not vote. Brokers therefore played an informal but necessary role as representatives of their community to the larger society during a period of anti-Asian sentiment and exclusion. Using new Chinese language evidence, my investigation of dramatic power struggles shows how Chinese immigrants became significant players in race relations and had an impact on policies that affected all Canadians and Americans.

Chinese brokers' work offers a transnational perspective on the process of political integration. Most studies of foreign migrants' political integration focus on immigrants who could eventually become citizens. While this was the norm for European immigrants, policies in Canada and the United States did not allow Asian immigrants equal access to voting and naturalization privileges. Chinese brokers’ use of power also reflected their roles as representatives of a migrant community that stretched across Canada, China, and the United States. Commonly, immigrant leadership has been conceived as domination of naive new arrivals by English-speaking merchants, labor contractors, interpreters, and professionals. Brokering Belonging conceives of transnational migrants’ integration into settler societies...
in more pluralistic terms: it focuses on the changing political relations between ordinary people, their leaders, and their institutions in the Pacific world.⁵

Canada implemented its first anti-Chinese immigration act in 1885, just as Chinese workers were completing the nation's first transcontinental railway. The first and second generation of brokers, backed by wealthy Chinese merchants, acted as representatives for the disenfranchised, establishing themselves among the community. These traditional brokers prioritized assuring a steady stream of Chinese immigrants. With corrupt or sympathetic partners in Anglo politics and business, the brokers helped many Chinese newcomers to evade anti-Chinese immigration laws. Even the legal route through Canada's borders was tightly controlled by these brokers and their allies in China. To this end, Chinese brokers often secured official immigration interpreter posts by making alliances with ruling party factions and by bribing politicians.⁶

Brokers also merged their Chinese clients' aspirations with British legal institutions. Chinese Canadians contended with laws and a justice system that frequently treated them unfairly. When Chinese appealed to Canadian and British Empire courts to rectify these wrongs, judges often upheld the white majority's right to discriminate against them.⁷ Despite these challenges, Chinese Canadians found ways to influence the larger legal culture. Chinese brought from China and the United States strong traditions of litigation, so they often turned to Canadian law to resolve disputes. Because British Columbia did not permit Chinese to practice law, Chinese legal interpreters worked as unofficial "Chinese lawyers" in legal negotiations that often expanded the Canadian state's influence in Chinese Canadian affairs. Chinese in the United States similarly dealt with popular demands for the rule of law and with racial barriers in the legal profession.⁸
Starting in the 1920s, traditional merchant brokers and legal interpreters faced new challenges from a third generation of charismatic brokers: intellectuals, labor leaders, and civil rights activists. The new brokerage was based less on wealth or patron-client relations and more on the active consciousness of thousands of Chinese. These new leaders burst onto the political stage in 1922 with a year-long mass protest movement against public school segregation. While this protest has been regarded as a local Chinese-Anglo conflict, Chinese evidence reveals it to be a transpacific event, rooted in global anti-colonial nationalist movements after the First World War. Anti-segregation leaders alluded to mass protests against British colonialism in China and India. Their efforts also paralleled rising labor unions and campaigns by Chinese Americans. This populism provoked severe backlashes from some Chinese and Anglo business leaders, but the social movement's power to bring ordinary people into brokerage politics could not be undone.

Astute intellectuals among these new brokers also attempted to reshape public discourse about Chinese in Canada and the United States. As the first major academic survey of East Asian immigrants' opinions began in 1924, its director, Robert Park of the University of Chicago, opined that Asians appeared to be more like blacks than whites. Chinese Canadian leaders in Vancouver believed that they could not leave the Survey of Race Relations' outcome to chance, so they coordinated the interview data that researchers would find. Chinese leaders countered Park's assumptions that Asians adapted more slowly than European immigrants by claiming that their own lives heralded Chinese Canadians' future as an educated, assimilated, deferential, and hard-working model minority. Their performance built on and added to nascent U.S.-Canada debates about factoring immigrants into more pluralistic visions of national life, rather than enforcing Anglo conformity.
Chinese in Victoria, Seattle, and San Francisco then did likewise, planting the seeds of enduring immigrant myths in the United States and Canada.\textsuperscript{13}

The waning of anti-Chinese laws is often attributed to liberalizing Anglo attitudes and Chinese Canadian lobbying.\textsuperscript{14} Brokers’ mass protests during the Second World War also contributed. Unpopular war policies put the traditional brokers favored by the Canadian government on the defensive. Charismatic brokers mobilized thousands of Chinese Canadians to combat war policies that made it difficult to send relief remittances to relatives in China. Thousands of Chinese workers also organized within their larger Canadian labor unions, protesting tax regulations and demanding equal pay. These protests pushed reluctant labor unions to combat Anglo racial discrimination just as new industrial relations policies made unions into more powerful political machines than in the past. An anti-conscription movement inspired thousands of Chinese to boycott military service to protest their disenfranchisement. Their protest also built on Canada’s larger conscription crisis, which bitterly divided British and French Canadians. This Chinese Canadian action highlights an overlooked dimension of the conscription crisis: a majority of Canada’s nonwhite population refused to serve. \textit{Brokering Belonging} ends in 1945, as Chinese Canadians’ new alliances began to shift their legal status from aliens to citizens and as the rise of Communist power in China ushered in a new era of Chinese Canadian transpacific relations.\textsuperscript{15}

Brokering relations provide a new lens which transforms common views of a global turn away from unrestricted entry to immigration restriction in the settlement nations of the Americas and the British Empire.\textsuperscript{16} This new regime of border controls first focused on Chinese, but it later expanded to encompass all immigrants.\textsuperscript{17} Many histories of this transition focus on the gatekeepers and their institutions,\textsuperscript{18} a perspective that renders invisible much of Chinese agency and Chinese internal tensions. Chinese brokers’ story
points toward another side of this gatekeeping story: its persistent failures. Chinese developed a global system of illegal immigration and secured local political protections that made continued migrations possible. Chinese Canadians achieved a true but unequal political integration. This history brings Chinese connections with the Pacific world back into the center of domestic histories of North America. The official settler story of Canada as a nation of immigrants coincided with an unofficial story of Canada that was written through global migrations at the crossroads of the Pacific, North American, and British worlds.


5 *Brokering Belonging’s* conception of brokers and brokerage relations was inspired by histories of modern China because few historians of Canada and the United States have fully explored ethnic leadership as a mediating force. I take an anthropological approach, which examines brokers and brokerage as part of an evolving set of social structures. Given shifting historical contexts, brokers’ changing and multiple roles cannot be reduced to a single form of dominance or a single theoretical approach. Therefore, I argue in favor of a more complex conception of race relations politics, which focuses on the ongoing construction of immigrants’ relationships to both societies. This meeting of different worlds involved social structures that arose from interacting forces: the brokers themselves, ordinary Chinese, and their Canadian allies. I also explore how the brokers’ representative power within race relations politics often expressed controversial patterns of dominance rooted both in immigrant and in wider Canadian society. Conceptually, histories of what scholars term China’s local elites provide the closest parallels to Chinese Canadian brokerage. The concept of elites in China’s local societies covers a wide range of dominant mediating figures who aided ordinary people in their dealings with the state. On “nonofficial” local elites as a central mediating force in modern Chinese history, see Esherick and Rankin’s introduction to *Chinese Local Elites,* Joseph W. Esherick, and Mary Backus Rankin, “Introduction,” in Esherick and Rankin, eds. *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance,* 1-24. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Melissa Macauley, *Social Power and Legal Culture:*


12 *Daban Gongbao* newspaper (hereafter abbreviated as *DHGB*), 14 Feb. 1924; Raushenbush, *British Columbia Major Documents*, box 24, files 24-1 through 24-35, SRR.


15 Mar, Brokering Belonging, 111-130.

