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Political Science: Politics of the Asian American Experience

Comparative Assimilation of Overseas Chinese: Canada and the United States

Introduction

Asian immigrants have been racialized, the process of imbuing a person with consciousness of race distinction, differently in Canada than in the United States. Canadian citizenship has been defined in civic, or individual quasi-legal, terms. American citizenship has been equated with being white. The very term *white* becomes problematic in Canada, as it is in much of Europe. The core of whiteness in America has been clustered around a population of English extraction. Never was there such a mass of non-English immigrants to overwhelm the construct. French (Huguenot refugees), Germans, Irish, Jews, Italians, Slavs each came in turn in waves but never approached the English (and assimilated English) populations (<http://www.ins.usdoj.gov/stats/300.html>). These groups were assimilated into the American (fundamentally Anglo-American) construct. In Canada, the British did not have such overwhelming dominance in the white population. Whereas in America, European groups were drawn from a dozen countries, Canada's non-British whites were largely French. In relative terms America's white ethnic groups were too small to produce ethnically-based political power. Secondly, with the acquisition of Quebec, British Canada faced the task of assimilating a Francophone population nearly as large as their own. This was an insurmountable task. (Admittedly, annexation is different from immigration in that people remain in their original homes on their original land. However, residents of annexed lands must, like immigrants, be incorporated into a new political and economic system.) The answer was a respect and thus empowerment of minority ethnic groups which would be allowed to form their own cultures in Canada. In the American context, each new wave was small enough to force-assimilate

eliminating the need to entrench minority communities.

An important question is: Did this construct extend beyond the white community? Chinese diaspora populations provide a useful case for comparison in that both the US and Canada have received significant immigrant flows and each group is a visible minority within the two countries. Filipino immigrants could not be used as America was the colonial overlord of the Philippines. South Asians likely presented a biased case as Canada was a dominion of the UK which concurrently ruled India. The fundamental issue for comparison in this paper is *assimilation*, the process by which a minority group adopts the customs and attitudes of the prevailing culture. Four major factors affect the likelihood of smooth assimilation or its desirability. Firstly, the international (geo-strategic) context for the countries involved must be considered. Secondly, the immigration policies and case law related to migration must be examined. Thirdly, the way in which the minority population is portrayed by mainstream media has significant bearing and hate crime rates can indicate the level of acceptance of assimilability or accommodation. Lastly, residential housing patterns (and the laws and customs which surround them) measure the level of mainstream accommodation. In the absence of clear, quantifiable measures of assimilation, the level of perceived assimilability as portrayed by laws, media and residential patterns is utilized.

Immigration and Assimilation

The Global Context: Colonial Expansion

The period in question extends from the beginning of the California gold rush until WWII, roughly one hundred years. In a global context this was a period of European (along with the US and Japan) colonial domination which would extend, through direct colonization or

spheres of influence, to encompass virtually the whole world. It was this colonial expansion which triggered emigration from China. The Chinese government had conducted very limited interactions with the West through the port of Canton, which could be regulated. To expand its trading privileges into the vast Chinese markets, the UK waged the Opium War against the Empire of China (1839-42) resulting in the acquisition of Hong Kong and opening of five ports to commerce by the Treaty of Nanjing. Additional concessions were made following the Anglo-Chinese War (1856-60) and Anglo-French occupation of Canton (1858-61). In this state of weakness, China negotiated treaty port agreements with other powers including France and Germany. In the hinterland surrounding each port the imperialist powers extended their influence through interactions with local leaders, undermining and discrediting the central authority of Beijing.

With the establishment of the port cities links to the west, Canton's monopoly on import/export trade ended. People who depended on this industry, directly or indirectly, became economically disadvantaged. The Taiping Rebellion (1850-64) swept through southern China killing 10 million. Civil unrest grew as power was *de facto* devolved to local warlords leading to interdialectic fighting. Taxes soared to fund indemnities demanded by Western governments and fields were destroyed by roving armies, severely damaging rice production. Labor recruiters in the port cities found refugees especially in Fujian and Guangdong willing to defy Beijing's official ban on emigration. The Chinese emigration to North America was part of a larger diaspora which sent many Chinese by *junk* to Southeast Asia. Sucheng Chan argues that had the western traders not been present in Hong Kong, Canton and Macao, Chinese emigres would not have undertaken the long journey to the Americas but settled in Indochina and insular regions to

the south (Chan 1991: 8). In sum, the push factor for Chinese emigration was the expansion of colonial domination which (1) undermined Chinese domestic economic and political control, (2) set off civil unrest and (3) created communication and transportation connections with the West. These, when coupled with massive population growth, led to an exodus (Tan 1985: 3).

The pull factor common to both host states was money. Labor recruiters initially brought Chinese for plantation work in Hawaii. The gold rushes (of California, British Columbia and the Yukon-Klondike) provided money in two ways (1) mining of gold and (2) mining town industries. In 1848, prospectors in California struck gold, leading to immigration from around the world. Chinese men took part in this rush conducting some of the early mining. They were subject to mob violence, larceny and intimidation. Many of them soon found an economic niche in the mining town service sector, providing such services as laundering. These services were relatively well-paid as the customers (miners) were acquiring incredible wealth. Often subject to discrimination and violence, Chinese earned \$30 monthly in Canada of which they were able to remit a substantial amount compared to \$2 in China. Plantation labor, mining, laundering, merchant shopkeeping and railway construction were common occupations of these immigrants on the west coasts of both Canada and the US. Immigrants continue to come to fill these jobs.

While such incentives were strong, the US and Canada were in competition with a number of other states to fill labor needs with immigrants. As part of this context, Americans and Canadians were hardly idle recipients of immigrants but energetic actors. Canada, of course, was a British colony until 1867 at which time it became a dominion of Her Majesty's Empire. Dominion status devolved significant power to local governments especially in domestic affairs while retaining a strategic alliance to the crown. The UK used this arrangement for most of its

white settler colonies. The US was itself an independent state with imperialist ambitions. Driven across the North American continent by an ideology of Manifest Destiny, the belief in a divine mission to colonize indigenous nonwhite populations and provide their land for European American expansion, Americans seized the continent as their own. By the century's end Americans would expand their imperialist mission beyond their shores, interfering in the new states of Latin America, seizing Spain's colonies and forcing Japan's ports open. The US also declared an 'Open Door' policy for China. To facilitate such a drive was a need for infrastructure and means of communication, to this end Chinese laborers were recruited for the construction of the (American) Transcontinental Railroad and the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR).

Canada and the US were conceived of as white settler colonies to which Chinese populations emigrated in an age of colonial expansion. The global context and the role of each state within it in respect to the Chinese seem not to vary sufficiently between the US and Canada to have explanatory value.

Immigration Policies and Case Law

From a legal standpoint there were some substantial differences between how the US and Canada treated their Chinese immigrants. Until the late nineteenth century, neither Canada nor the US regulated immigration from China; emigration laws managed the flow. In the seventeenth century China executed emigres upon their return. China maintained an official policy of an emigration ban until well after the beginnings of European incursion. This policy was not initially problematic until the push-pull factors (outlined above) stimulated a critical mass of economic refugees who sought work elsewhere. In the face of its inability to enforce such laws in the nineteenth century, Beijing entered into immigration agreements with foreign powers. In

1868, the Burlingame Treaty officially ended the emigration ban with the US and China affirming the right of individuals to change their domiciles and allegiances. Henceforth, migration flows would be regulated by immigration laws of the host country.

The first American attempt at the regulation of the foreign mining population came in the form of California's foreign miners tax (1850) of \$20 per month. The tax forced Latinos, who refused to pay the tax, out of this extraction business, leaving Chinese as the largest foreign group against whom subsequent actions would be directed. In 1870, the 1790 Nationality Act was amended to permit the naturalization of Americans of African descent but left Chinese as aliens ineligible to citizenship. Immigration laws over the next ten years dealt principally with criminality (especially anarchists) and mental disorders. On May 6, 1882, Congress promulgated the Chinese Exclusion Act which added Chinese laborers to the list of unwanted peoples. Bill Ong Hing sees the significance of this act as Chinese were the first group excluded by federal law (Hing 1993: 19). Hing may overstate the importance of federalization of immigration law when taken in the context of the times. In the post-American Civil War Reconstruction period, the federal government significantly expanded its powers. The Civil War in many ways was a dispute over the issue of state's rights which the federal government won. In keeping with this trend of federalization which created such institutions as the ICC, federalization of immigration policy is nothing so shocking. The impetus behind the 1882 Exclusion Act came from white organized labor on the west coast where Irish union organizers replicated much of the hostility which had been directed against them on the other side of the continent. Testimony against the Act came from big business on the west coast (especially the railways) who economically benefitted from a pool of cheap disenfranchised labor. The Act was a major victory of the white

working class labor union movement over white business interests at the expense of Chinese labor. Racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric facilitated the recruitment of whites into the labor unions in California, the state which was most targeted. More general Asian exclusion laws were passed in 1917 and 1924 establishing an Asian Barred Zone and National Origins Quotas respectively. Only in the midst of WWII (1943) was the Chinese Exclusion Act formally repealed allowing a token number of entrances for a wartime ally suffering at the hands of a common enemy, Japan. The 1952 McCarran-Walter Act abolished the Asian Barred Zone and placed a limit of 2,000 immigrants for the Asia-Pacific Triangle. In 1965, the Triangle was repealed and replaced with national quotas of 20,000 with a preference given to family reunification.

Between 1886 and 1914, Canada received two million immigrants. Policies offered free farmland in the west to immigrants from America, the UK and Eastern Europe but terms were less favorable to Asians. Beginning in 1858, large numbers of Chinese came to Canada (mostly from California) to prospect in British Columbia's gold mines. In 1861, British Columbia amended the Franchise Act of 1859 to permit aliens in residence for at least three years to vote. Almost immediately an attempt to impose a \$10 poll tax on Chinese was attempted and failed as animosity against Chinese was then rather limited (Con 1982: 42). In 1902, Chinese Canadians were disenfranchised at the provincial level in British Columbia and Saskatchewan but not Alberta. Since, Dominion rolls utilized provincial lists most Chinese in Canada lost voting rights at all levels (Con 1982: 83). This removal of franchise was recommended by the Royal Commission to investigate oriental immigration due to what was perceived as rampant tax evasion on the part of the Chinese (Con 1982: 82). In 1885, to satisfy white laborers who feared for their jobs, Canada established a Head Tax Law which charged each Chinese \$50 for entry

to be collected by the ship's captain (Con 1982: 57). This did not stem the flow as Chinese could earn \$28 per month more in Canada than in China; they simply borrowed to pay the tax. The government increased the tax twice in 1900 to \$100 and three years later to \$500 (Con 1982: 82). Wealthy Chinese continued to come (Jin Guo 1992: 27), producing somewhat of a class shift. In 1907, MP's brought forth the Natal Act which required a language test for prospective immigrants as was used in South Africa; this measure was disallowed by Lieutenant-General James Dunsmuir (Con 1982: 84). Following the American lead, the Asiatic Exclusion League lobbied successfully for the Chinese Immigration Act (1923), which banned Chinese immigration except for consuls, merchants and students. During the 24 years during which it was in force, only 44 Chinese entered Canada legally.

Key differences between the US and Canada were that in Canada land ownership, miscegenation and naturalization were legal (Con 1982: 149) and that the driving force behind restrictions came more from politicians than labor unions which struck with Chinese laborers in 1917. Nationally 5% were naturalized varying from 3% in British Columbia (where 70% of Chinese were located) to 20% in Ontario (Con 1982: 150). Though disenfranchised, Canada's Chinese could become citizens: own land, trucks, and corporations; attend university, seek legal recourse, and participate (informally) in civic affairs (Con 1982: 179). Not until 1947 was franchise a citizenship right. With the beginning of the Depression, Canada's Chinese utilized the country's welfare system (Con 1982: 185). In 1947, as a result of the Second World War, franchise was restored to the Chinese and the 1923 Immigration Act repealed providing preference to relatives of Canadian citizens (Con 1982: 188). The war effort (including military service, in which some Chinese became commissioned officers, purchased of war bonds,

agricultural production and worked in war industries) and the emergence of family life and higher living standards (defined as ownership of material status symbols, e.g., automobiles, found in many middle-class white households) among Chinese won over many white supporters. Canada-born Chinese began to seek white living standards and moved out of Chinatowns to live in white middle-class suburbs in the 1940's (Con 1982: 201), compared to the US which took another two decades. Furthermore, the wartime alliance with China and the revelation of Nazi racist doctrine made much of the overt racism untenable in Canada and the US. In 1947, Canada's Chinese population stood at 34,000; 24,000 new Chinese (PRC, ROC, HK, SG) immigrants arrived over the next 15 years (Con 1982: 217). Growth in Montréal and Toronto was greatest. By the 1950's, Chinese Canadians were campaigning for MP seats.

In respect to immigration law, Canada maintained restrictions for a shorter time period and the extent of penetration was less than the US. Penetration was less in that immigration was regulated and Chinese were disenfranchised, but they retained other citizenship rights. Laws did not micromanage the lifestyles of Chinese Canadians to the degree America's did. Canada also seemed to follow the example of the US in immigration policy. Arguably, legislation was less severe in Canada due to a problem with Canadian democracy: limitations on its responsiveness. The British Columbia legislature passed numerous anti-Chinese laws which were never implemented because His Majesty's government disallowed, or essentially, vetoed, them. From a legal standpoint there were some substantial differences between how the US and Canada treated their Chinese immigrants.

Media Portrayal and Hate Crimes

On September 7, 1907, Canada experienced an event so momentous it has become

thenceforth referred to as the Riots. Billed by Vancouver's *World* to be the largest demonstration ever, a number of xenophobic speakers from the US and Canada addressed a crowd numbering between 8,000 and 30,000 (Sugimoto 1978: 118). Following charismatic speeches from politicians and ministers, the growing crowd set off toward Chinatown on a wild and wanton orgy of destruction (Sugimoto 1978: 122). The white mob smashed glassed storefronts, forcing Chinese inhabitants to barricade themselves in the interiors of their shops. Police, after much trouble, restored order, arresting a number of the rioters. This was a riot which targeted property; there were no fatalities (Sugimoto 1978: 130). In the subsequent days, police established a *cordon sanitaire* around Chinatown and Japantown. Local dailies such as the *Post-Intelligencer* in their reports massively overestimated numbers of Asians arriving and residing in the city. Alternately, the *News-Advertiser* called for a return to law and order of British tradition reminding Vancouver that protection is a right within British jurisdiction regardless of race or nationality. The paper called the riot disgraceful and demanded punishment of criminals (Sugimoto 1978: 137). The *News-Advertiser* and *World* also argued that there was not a connection between the anti-Asian speeches and the riots, attributing the disturbance to a gang of hoodlums (Sugimoto 1978: 138). Falling short of condonement, *Colonist* and *Province* saw the riots as a clear expression of popular sentiment against Canada becoming a dumping ground of yellow cheap labor (Sugimoto 1978: 141-2). The *Chronicle* and *Herald*, both Ontario-based publications, blamed American agitators for the riots, arguing the US sought to cause a rift in the Anglo-Japanese relationship to its strategic benefit. In London, the *Times* shared this sentiment (Sugimoto 1978: 149). The same editors who had fanned the flames of racism and xenophobia roundly condemned their agitation in its overt manifestation. Public disgust at the riots, however,

did little to dampen exclusionary forces. Following the 1907 Vancouver Riot, PM King was shocked that the Canadian government would have to compensate for the damage to two opium factories. The journalists associated Chinese with drug trade, considered them unclean and obsessed with gambling and prostitution (Tan 1985: 12). (NB. This was a predominantly male unmarried lower class.) These stereotypes stayed with the whites before and after the riots. Such events as these riots are remarkable because they were relatively rare in Canada; however, boycotts and intimidation were used against the Chinese with every business slump (Con 1982: 179).

Anti-Chinese violence in the United States ranged from crimes against property and intimidation to lynching and expulsions. In the US most of the Asian victims were farm laborers (Chan 1991: 52) which contrasts to Canada's experiences in Vancouver and Victoria. The American courts appear to have been less likely to offer recourse (Chan 1991: 49) as Chinese Americans lacked citizenship rights. The US government expressed its unwillingness to compensate Chinese for their losses. Riots occurred in Seattle, San Francisco and Tacoma, to name a few, but none approached the scale of the 1907 Vancouver Riots. What they lacked in destructive capability, American riots made up for in longevity and frequency. Canada experienced one huge disturbance (large enough to be condemned) while the US saw numerous major disruptions. American riots were also directed more toward people where Canada's equivalent almost exclusively targeted property (Chan 1991: 51). Of course, in neither country has anti-Asian violence ended. Canada's proportionally lower rate of anti-person (as compared to anti-property) violence may speak more to Canada's overall low murder rate rather than greater contemporary acceptance of Chinese.

American reporting differed little from that to the north. The key point is that anti-Chinese propaganda appeared successfully in New York and Boston but not in Toronto and Hamilton. Any Chinese problem in Canada was (for a significant time) considered a local issue where the US was more cohesive in its xenophobia. The lack of a nation-wide editorial ideology and cohesiveness in Canada as compared to the US may be related to a lower degree of media ownership concentration.

Residential Patterns

Chinese immigrants to Canada have never been legally excluded from owning or the leasing of land in agricultural areas or in the cities. Chinese property holdings are spread throughout the city and Chinese do not own all property in Chinatown (Aiken 1989: 265). The majority of Chinese did not live in Chinatown and increasing numbers populated suburbs surrounding the city (Aiken 1989: 104). This is not to say that there has not been *de facto* residential discrimination but that it has never had the strength of law and was not as pervasive as in some other countries. Chinatowns formed, in Canada, the nucleus for the Chinese community, but as early as 1890 significant Chinese populations were scattered throughout the city. These Chinatown nuclei offered imported products and the headquarters of cultural organizations. Until 1910, Chinese were primarily renters (Aiken 1989: 131); however, Chinese ownership rates were as high as the city as a whole (Aiken 1989: 160). From early this century (expanding following WWII) Chinese land holdings and rental properties have scattered into predominantly white neighborhoods. The population appears mobile in the absence of a concerted effort by the white community to create residential segregation.

American residential patterns took a more segregated mode as had previously been

practiced on African Americans. In 1879, California required all incorporate cities and towns to expel Chinese from their respective jurisdictions. The Supreme Court officially forbade the law as a violation of the 14th Amendment. In 1900, citing health reasons (bubonic plague) Honolulu quarantined 4,500 Chinese and burned its Chinatown to the ground (Chan 1991: 57). It was not until after WWII that Chinese American veterans were able to live in white neighborhoods (Chan 1991: 140). Only in 1956 did California repeal the alien land laws (Chan 1991: 142) which prohibited the purchase or lease of land (Chan 1991: 47). Consequently, ownership rates were suppressed.

Analysis and Conclusion

Summary of Findings

Returning to the fundamental question of comparative assimilation, Canada seems to be a very attractive destination for new Chinese immigrants. According to the CIA, Canada is 11.5% Asian and the US is 3.3% (CIA 1997). The State Department notes that there were no incidences of anti-Chinese violence, intimidation, or discrimination in 1997 in Canada (DOS 1998: 8). Since 1988, Canada has been the top destination for Hong Kong Chinese, accounting for nearly half of its worldwide emigrants (Cannon 1989: 251), receiving more than 20,000 in that year alone. Historically, Canada has received large numbers (relative to its population) of Chinese immigrants mainly funneled through Canton and Hong Kong.

The experience of Chinese Canadians in their first century of mass immigration was relatively less intimidating than in the United States. Laws, violence, and residential patterns show a story of a people who were discriminated against but not as intrusively as in the US. At this point, all that can be determined is that Chinese Canadians were racialized differently than in

the US. The qualitative experience of early Chinese immigrants, when coupled with a concerted recruiting effort orchestrated by the government, may explain the continuing popularity of Canada as a destination for China's emigres. Now that legally, in both countries, ethnic Chinese have full citizenship rights, only perception lingers in individuals, which is often propagated by the media, by which to discriminate. How have different legal histories impacted public perception after the laws have been harmonized? Land ownership, marriage and naturalization rights in Canada were not revoked as in the US. For Americans to take such actions required a dehumanization, or at least a subhumanization, of the Chinese population. To merely restrict immigration is not so drastic. Restriction on the basis of race is racist, a component of a construct which seeks to maintain straight, elite, white male hegemony. Such restriction was driven by perceived economic necessity to preserve jobs for the *in-group*. At its core, such measures could be imposed upon fellow humans; race was used because it is an easily detectable, visible characteristic. Under such a construct, restrictions and discrimination could exist in a temporary legal realm and be extricated from cultural and social ideologies when finally outlawed. To re-humanize a people requires nation-wide re-education over the course of generations. Fundamentally, it is the differential depth and extent of the penetration and intrusiveness of laws in the pre-WWII period which has formed the difference in racialization between the US and Canada for Chinese diaspora populations that exists today.

Theoretical Implications

What permitted these legal differences? The answer lies in how legal citizenship is constructed. Now, citizenship is determined by bloodline alone in Israel and Germany; location of birth has a role in all other countries. Within a decade of the Treaty of Paris, the US

government wrote into law that being white was a criterion for citizenship by naturalization. While permitting *jus solis* for the children of immigrants, the American citizenship policy tended to be one of *jus sanguinis*. In this way, race, or in this case whiteness, became the line of demarcation. Race has played a limited role in Europe, yet the European settler-dominated colony of America built its society around race, why? In Europe, ethnolinguistic lines are the dominant form of division. However, in America, English became the unofficial but culturally-ordained national language and thus muted many possible linguistic communities as Anglophones became dominant. With immigrants never more than 20% of independent America's population and in the nineteenth century many of even those immigrants hailing from the British Isles, English was not threatened as the national language. A language is more than a system of sound patterns which has semantic and pragmatic meaning, it symbolizes and reinforces an entire culture by providing commonalities. This Anglo-American culture, also, was never under threat of being overwhelmed. Incorporation into the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant-dominated system followed for each new immigrant group. To be naturalized, these groups had to legally be considered white. Whiteness was the litmus test.

Canadian citizenship, on the racial-civic continuum, falls more on the civic side. Racial groups in Canada were treated differently, even discriminatorily, but the fundamental construction of citizenship remained non-racial in its genesis. Race as a societal foundation is less developed as other factors form their own cleavages. The foremost of these language. Over one-fourth of the Canadian population now, far more a century ago, is Francophone. This population, also, unlike some ethnolinguistic scattered pockets in the US, is concentrated and retains political power in the important province of Quebec. Language competes with race to be

the division upon which societal hierarchy is founded. The Québécois also did not submit to assimilation into Anglophone hegemony. In the early construction of Canadian identity, a place for French speakers had to be created. Subsequent populations as they incorporated themselves into a dynamic Canadian construct could look to this Francophone model with their demands for recognition of an ethnic identity within a larger Canadian nation-state identity – a dual identity. With existing data, this Quebec Construction seems likely but not fully proven.

Agenda for Future Research

Due to time and budgetary constraints, this essay is not as comprehensive as an exploration of this topic could be. In future work on comparative immigration, scholars should analyze other additional immigrant groups. The Quebec Thesis argued in this essay needs to be tested on immigrant groups from different races. In addition, a large-scale, national survey of the individual's racial stereotypes needs to be conducted in both countries over a period of decades and stratified for age cohort. A large number of personal interviews with people of different demographic backgrounds in both countries could also add depth to the argument. Those who wish to conduct case-studies of national immigration patterns, such as Bill Ong Hing, should strive to utilize a comparative methodology wherever possible. This is seemingly a rich topic for subsequent research.

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