

China in the Overseas Imaginary: Huaqiao and the Strengthening China Movement

“The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association and China, 1884-1922”

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“The Transpacific Fights of the Dare-to-Die Vanguard of the Overseas Chinese, 1915-1916”

Zhongping Chen, Associate Professor, Department of History, University of Victoria

“Victoria Cheung and the War of Resistance against Japanese Imperialism”

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“China’s State Farms for Returned Overseas Chinese: Models or Burdens?”

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Panel Description

The formation of Chinese national consciousness is intricately related to the experiences abroad of many emigrants. From the early days of migration to the Americas, many overseas Chinese perceived the need to help or reinforce China. Some did this for humanist sympathies. Others imagined an independent China able to put an end to the unequal treaties first imposed by the Euro-American powers and then emulated by a rising Japan. The annexation of Korea in 1905-1910 had been an object lesson demonstrating that in the era of imperialism, only strong states would survive. Patriotism also had another, more practical dimension. Many believed a stronger China would be able to better advocate for Chinese abroad, many of whom faced hostility and racism in the Americas. The republican movement, the movement for national independence, and the desire to strengthen China after the 1949 revolution brought many overseas Chinese to China as part of an ongoing movement to strengthen the country.

This panel examines the strengthening China movement from diverse vantage points across the temporal spectrum. Chinese in the Americas organized themselves in numerous ways including through the establishment of benevolent associations. The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association archival records held by the University of Victoria contain numerous documents highlighting the perspective of overseas community leaders towards China through its many phases. Founded in 1884, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association was a crucial force in Victoria’s immigrant history. The oldest Association of its kind in North America, the CCBA was an active participant in Canadian life, struggling to build an inclusive society and to gain individual and group rights for people of Chinese origin. The era covered by these documents (1884 to 1922)

was a difficult one for Chinese immigrants, when the completion of the Trans-Canada Railroad in 1885 threw thousands out of work. At the same time, the Canadian government instituted the “Head Tax,” and anti-Chinese riots broke out in several Canadian cities. The majority of Canada’s Chinese population was based in Victoria, which became the centre of the immigrants’ struggle for human rights. All these brought up the complex feelings of early Chinese immigrants about China, their original country. In the CCBA fond, we see the Chinese immigrants’ efforts in seeking support from China for their experience in Canada, for example, the communications with the Chinese Foreign Ministry and the Chinese Consulate in San Francisco. We also see the immigrants’ enthusiastic donations for the natural disasters, revolutionary activities and even the national defenses in China.

The Chinese Nationalist League (Guomingang) in Canada was another institutional player dedicated to strengthening the republican movement. It organized young Chinese immigrants to engage in military training in Victoria, Vancouver, Edmonton, and other Canadian cities from 1915 and further dispatched them as the Dare-to-Die Vanguard of the Overseas Chinese (Huaqiao gansi xianfengdui) to join revolutionary battles with Yuan Shikai’s monarchical movement in China in 1916. These young Chinese immigrants joined the transpacific fights not only because of their patriotic commitment to revolutionary cause in their homeland but also because of the ever-spiraling white racism against Chinese in Canada and the increasing influence of the Chinese Nationalist League in their everyday life. As a result, the Dear-to-Die Vanguard from Canada led to the development of similar organizations among the overseas Chinese in the United States, Japan and Southeast Asia, and more than 500 returned migrants formed the Overseas Chinese Volunteer Corps (Huaqiao yiyongtuan) and joined the battle with Yuan Shikai’s army in northern China. While the Overseas Chinese Volunteer Corps helped defeat Yuan’s monarchical movement in China in 1916, its leaders continued their military mobilization in Canada

A different approach to strengthening China was the attempt by overseas Chinese Christians to dispatch or support missionaries to China. A specific case study is that of Victoria Cheung. Born in Victoria in 1897 to Chinese parents active in the Chinese Methodist Church, Victoria Cheung went on to become the first Chinese Canadian to obtain a medical degree from the University of Toronto. She became a medical missionary with the United Church of Canada and arrived in Jiangmen (Kongmoon) in 1923 to take up work at what was then known as the Marion Barclay hospital. While most Canadian missionaries either left the field or were interned after 1941, Dr. Victoria Cheung remained in China, passing as a ‘Chinese’. Refusing to collaborate with the Japanese occupiers, she helped establish clinics in the communities that provided basis medical services for the townspeople during the Occupation. She remained in China after the 1949 revolution and became an important leader in the medical field until her death in 1966.

Not all overseas Chinese who remained in China after 1949 stayed in the cities. From the early 1950s to the early 1980s, the Chinese government created over 80 state farms to resettle Chinese returned from foreign countries. These state farms were initially set up as models for the surrounding villages, but by the 1980s, the Chinese leaders had realized that the state farms were actually burdens for the state and they then decided that the state farms should follow the model of the villages. This reform movement arose out of specific factors that made the state farms for returned overseas Chinese a liability rather than an asset. Under this process, such state farms will eventually disappear and the returned overseas Chinese will inevitably assimilate into society at large.