

Stronger Together Essay Competition (Senior Category 18-35)

Topic 2: In your opinion, how did the struggles, achievements and contributions of past Asian Canadians help shape the present and future generations?

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Age Old Feud with Discrimination

Asian Canadians have been leaping over hurdles not just for themselves but for future generations to come, and one group that has done so for several centuries are Chinese Canadians. Since the 19th century, Chinese Canadians arrived in Canada for various reasons and purposes, but beyond their place of origin, there was another unbreakable bond that linked all of them together — the Sisyphean task of fighting against the demon named *Discrimination*. Time and again, Chinese Canadians combated against Discrimination to dismantle segregation, end exclusion, and prove their loyalty and worth in blood in order to pave the way for future generations.

When one thinks about segregation in the world, one cannot help but think about the notorious Apartheid in South Africa yet when one looks closer to home; Canada has its own dark history of segregation that was swept under the rug in its treatment of Chinese Canadians in the early 20th century. *542-562 Figard Street and 623 Figard Street*. For the grand majority of present day Canadians, these addresses may mean nothing yet to the descendants of Chinese Canadians who lived through segregation; these addresses are a slap in the face and a painful reminder of racial bigotry that once permeated in Canadian society. In 1907, Anglo-European parents whose children studied in the Victoria School Board complained that “Chinese students were dirty, ill-mannered and obstructed the progress of the class as a whole,” (Robertson, 2016). As a result of such complaints, the Victoria School Board caved to parental pressure and passed a resolution so all Chinese students must pass an English exam in order to attend public schools. It is critical to mention how this resolution only applied to Chinese students rather than students from other minority groups or those spoke another language besides English. This resolution led

to the formation of one of aforementioned addresses as 623 Figard Street is the address of a Chinese Public School that was built to help students pass the public school entrance exams.

At this point, one would assume that through hard work and dedication, this would lead to success for more Chinese students, yet sadly, the story does not end there. As the summer of 1922 rolled by, the school board decided to implement a segregated school system on **all** of the city's Chinese students (Robertson, 2016). The lurking monster named Discrimination was fully unleashed and now basked in sunlight as the school segregation created a two-tiered education system, and showed the school board's desire to openly buy into racism by deeming one racial group inferior to another. However, silence is complacency and enough is enough. Chinese students refused to attend the segregated schools by organizing a strike through enlisting the help of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), an organization that campaigned against discriminatory laws at all levels of government, and whose base was located in a building at 542-562 Figard Street. This tough confrontation against the Discrimination ended one year later in 1923 when the monster was temporarily defeated. The School Board finally relented and allowed students to return to their original school even though English proficiency was still used as a rule to segregate students. For now, segregation was mostly ended and it appeared to be a victory for Chinese students and helped to create more open education access to all Chinese students for future generations.

Yet good times do not last. In the same year of 1923, Discrimination manifested itself into another nasty form— *Exclusion*— on Canada's birthday, with the introduction of the Chinese Immigration Act, also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, which essentially banned Chinese immigrants to Canada from 1923-1947. The Chinese Exclusion Act was overt racism implemented as law and many Chinese today still refer to July 1 as "Humiliation Day" (Chan,

2017). This anger is not unfounded as it is important to note that during this period, migration into Canada was controlled in some way or form, but only Chinese people were singled out and the exemptions included students, merchants (excluding laundry, restaurant or retail operators), diplomats, and Canadian-born Chinese who were returning from their education in China (Chan, 2017). Considering how many Chinese at this time worked in laundromats, restaurants, or retails, it is not difficult to comprehend the more sinister implications of the exclusions, which quite explicitly spells, *this country does not want you here*. The Chinese Exclusion Act left profound psychological trauma on the Chinese Canadians who lived in Canada during that time period. Dr. Henry Yu, a history professor at the University of British Columbia, fondly remembers being shown off to his grandfather's friends because many of the men who lived during the era of the Chinese Exclusion Act could not bring their families over from China and remained bachelors, so they could only live out the remainder of lives in Canada in solitude (as cited in McCrae, n.d.). To worsen matters, those who already called the country their home feared being kicked out of the country (McCrae, n.d). Not only were there a high possibility of solitude for your entire life and instances of segregation that have not completely disappeared, but the Chinese who were living in Canada during this period often had the fear of deportation looming over their heads because the authorities sought ways to remove more Chinese from the country. Again, the generation who lived from 1923-1947 seemed like a lost, vulnerable, and transient group, so how could they possibly overcome the struggle of being the "yellow peril" and the unwanted race in an unfriendly country?

There was only one answer and that was proving your worth and loyalty to your country. The Canadian Chinese in the country rose to the challenge to change white Canada's views by fighting in World War II. In 1941, Canada declared war on Japan and this meant Canada and

China now had a shared common enemy causing Chinese and non-Chinese Canadians to band together for a common cause. Additionally, 600 Chinese Canadians signed up to fight in the war for Canada (Historica Canada, n.d.).

Although the scope of this essay focuses on Chinese Canadians' crusade against discrimination in Canadian society, it is imperative to take a moment to recognize the struggle of all Asian Canadians and reflect on the intricate relations between different Asian groups. While Chinese Canadians were now tolerated since the home front united in its efforts against the rise of fascism, one must remember that this was not the same experience shared by all Asians, especially Japanese Canadians, who were seen as enemies of the country and were "detained, dispossessed, and dispersed," (Marsh, 2012). The lessening hostility and increasing tolerance of Chinese Canadians came at the price of amplified hostility towards another Asian group, the Japanese, as well as the terrible price paid in blood by Chinese Canadians who lost their lives in the war to show their loyalty and prove their worth to Canada.

Nevertheless, the courageous Chinese Canadians who fought in the military and served the country merely hoped for recognition that they too were human and worthy, and that they too should walk freely in the country and earn the right to vote. As Roy Mah, a World War II veteran explains in his interview with Sudha Krishna from CBC News, fighting in the war was a strategic move as Chinese Canadians earned the right to vote in 1947 (Krishna, 1997). Since the memory of the brave Chinese Canadians was still fresh in the minds of the white majority, Chinese Canadians earned the vote and the Chinese Exclusion Act was also lifted. The veterans' efforts paid off since fighting in the war marked the beginning of an era where more Chinese could begin to settle in Canada and all future Chinese Canadians would be able to vote. Even if it were only the wives who were admitted at this time, this was still progress in the right direction

substantiating that the veterans' toils and contributions were all worth it in the end. This marked a major milestone in defeating Discrimination in a double blow since the racist Chinese Exclusion Act was finally abolished and Chinese Canadians were now recognized as citizens who had the right to vote like any other Canadian.

In fact, Chinese Canadians gained more firepower to attack Discrimination during the new period of peace in 1967 when Canada adopted a new immigration policy. The new policy introduced the points system that assigned points to people based on criteria like language fluency, education, and job skills. It also became easier for Canadians to sponsor relatives from abroad (Simons & Clancy, 2017). These new immigration criteria meant that immigration offices were no longer to discriminate on the basis of race, and this was a cause of celebration for everyone around the world who wanted to immigrate to Canada. In the eyes of non-Chinese Canadians, the view towards Chinese and Asian immigrants in general changed drastically because the points system brought forth a system of meritocracy; therefore, those who were able to immigrate to Canada had proven their worth by possessing qualifications and skills that the country wanted in her future citizens. Many Hong Kongers began immigrating to Canada en masse in the 1980s and as Anthony B. Chan (2000) writes:

The Hong Kong exodus was the defining watershed in the Global Era as these new immigrants brought professional expertise, industrial and manufacturing knowledge, international marketing links, a Confucian-based value system of business relationships and plenty of cash. They were the ultimate capitalists who moved Chinese Canada from a local service-based economy of greengrocers, laundries and restaurants to an international market-oriented economy that not only included the Chinatowns of Canada, but all of Canada itself (12).

The change in immigration patterns meant that Hong Kongers helped convince the Canadian public that Chinese Canadians could contribute to the country beyond the service-based economy as they could offer various forms of capital to boost Canada's coffers and make her wealthier in many ways. This influx of wealthy, professional and educated immigrants brought more Chinese culture, such as: Chinese opera, martial arts organization, Chinese-based television and newspapers, cross cultural exchanges, global economic trade opportunities, and more (Chan, A. B., 2019). Money speaks and the growing Chinese capitalist class opened doors for future generations looking to immigrate to Canada and seek a better and more prosperous future. The image of the poor, uneducated, and dirty Chinese person was finally destroyed in the hearts and minds of all Canadians since these new immigrants exhibited promising traits as future Canadian citizens.

In conclusion, throughout the 19th and 20th century, Chinese Canadians had battled against the near-immortal monster named Discrimination in its many identities of segregation, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and heightened measures of worthiness. Relentlessly, Chinese Canadians fought and defeated the monster temporarily only to have it resurface and wear a different mask each time. In the 21st century, Discrimination has emerged as outright Anti-Asian racism. Like previous Chinese Canadians, it is time for the current generation to wage war against Discrimination. May the spirits of past Chinese Canadians provide guidance, and may the inherited sword of justice provide power to all who fight this battle today.

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