

The War for Rights and Belonging:

The Experience of Chinese-Canadians During the Second World War

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When Canada decided to join the Allied war effort in September 10, 1939, Canadians throughout the country returned to wartime mode. However, not all Canadians were accepted when it came to sending armed forces to fight for Canada overseas. This occurred during a time when racist attitudes against non-whites was still the norm. As such, conscription was reserved for those of European descent, and largely excluded all people of colour as well as any Canadians that were descendants of Germany and other enemy territories. This was especially true for the Chinese, who experienced racism ever since they first arrived in Canada in the 1850s. This paper will look at the Chinese-Canadian experience during the Second World War and their contributions to Canadian society. There will first be a brief history of conscription of minority populations in Canada during the Second World War, and focus in on the discrimination against the Chinese. It will also look at the necessity for Chinese troops during the war, and finally, why the Chinese contribution was significant for both the Chinese community and Canada as a whole.

Conscription of Minority Populations During World War II in Canada

Even though minority populations took on different service roles during the First World War on behalf of Canada, there was no improvement for their treatment. Instead, racism towards minorities worsened. At the start of the Second World War when many Canadians enlisted to serve their country, minority populations were faced with exclusionary regulations for the navy, air force, and army.¹ Such exclusionary measures were put in place by the Canadian forces to model the British forces, and the main requirement was that candidates had to be of pure European descent in order to be considered.² This effectively turned away many minority

¹ Mathias Joost, "Racism and Enlistment: The Second World War Policies of the Royal Canadian Air Force," *Canadian Military History* 21 (2012): 17.

² Joost, "Racism and Enlistment," 18; Howard Joe (2010) goes as far as to say that "every male had to be a British citizen to qualify for conscription." Howard Joe, *Golden Opportunities: The Contribution and Developments of the Chinese in Early North America* (St. Catharine's: The Zhou Family Press, 2010), 382; Larry Wong, "The Canadian

populations in Canada from serving in the war. Ultimately, this was disheartening for many as it seemed that steps were being made towards more inclusion and acceptance. But by preventing minority populations from serving in the war – even those that were naturalized Canadian citizens or those that were born in Canada – it showed that systemic racism was still a very real problem in Canadian society.

Even though there were many exclusionary provisions, minorities were still able to overcome these measures and serve in various roles during the war. Different ethnic groups such as the Chinese, the Jewish, Francophones, status Indians, and even Canadians who could trace their roots back to that of enemy nations such as the Italians enlisted in various proportions, though exact numbers are unknown.³ The need for minority conscription from those of Asian descent was not needed until the war in the Pacific theatre began to intensify around 1940.

To Fight or Not to Fight: Volunteering for the War

The Chinese started to arrive in Canada around the 1850s to take part in the Gold Rush as well as building the Canadian Pacific Railway. Throughout this time, despite making these contributions to the broader community and even volunteering to serve in the First World War, the Chinese faced harsh discrimination and were stripped of their rights. By 1923, as a final move to prevent more Chinese from immigrating to Canada, the Chinese Immigration Act (also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act) was put in place. It prohibited all people of Chinese descent to immigrate to Canada and put Chinese-Canadians into the category of aliens.⁴

Chinese Exclusion Act and the Veterans Who Overcame It,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (2007): 219.

³ Jack Granastein, “Ethnic and Religious Enlistment in Canada During the Second World War,” *Canadian Jewish Studies* 21 (2014): 177.

⁴ Larry Wong, “The Canadian Chinese Exclusion Act and the Veterans Who Overcame It,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (2007): 219.

When the Second World War started, debates broke out in Chinatown to determine how the Chinese would proceed. Many Chinese saw the war as an opportunity to show their loyalty for Canada and eventually be treated as first-class citizens. However, other Chinese did not want to “fight for a country that did not want them.”⁵ In the end, the Chinese decided to volunteer for the war and tried to enlist. But even with the most patriotic of intentions, the Chinese were rarely accepted by recruiting offices due to the fact that they were not white. Many Chinese had difficulty in trying to get into the navy and the air force due to restrictive measures based on ethnicity.⁶

Despite the exclusions against the Chinese for the armed forces, many volunteered for different positions. Within the Chinese population, there were many that were educated in different fields such as the medical and technical fields, food services, communications and many others.⁷ Both Chinese men and women filled many of these roles, which helped to save time and money while gaining more human power to keep up with the growing demands at the front lines.

The Need for the Chinese

There were a few events that occurred that helped to increase tolerance, and even sympathy, for the Chinese. One of the biggest events that occurred was the Sino-Japanese war that started in 1937. As the violence between the two countries raged in China, sympathy for the Chinese grew, prompting a distinction to be made between the Chinese and the Japanese in

⁵ Wong, “The Canadian Chinese Exclusion Act,” 219.

⁶ Mathias Joost, “Racism and Enlistment: The Second World War Policies of the Royal Canadian Air Force,” *Canadian Military History* 21 (2012): 17.

⁷ Howard Joe, *Golden Opportunities: The Contribution and Developments of the Chinese in Early North America* (St. Catharine’s: The Zhou Family Press, 2010), 387.

Canada.⁸ The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941 quickly shifted the American focus to the Pacific theatre. As the Imperial Japanese Army began to invade and occupy Southeast Asia, the Allied forces now had to find a way to defeat not only the Germans in Europe but now the Japanese in the Pacific.

With the imminent threat of the Japanese, the policy of British subjects only in the navy and the air force was reconsidered. It was soon recognized that white Allied soldiers alone could not possibly win the Pacific theatre, due to the vastness of the area, difficult terrain, and the fact that white soldiers would not be able to blend in with the local populations.⁹ By 1944-1945, the once rigid and racially charged conscription requirements became more relaxed, and about 150 Chinese-Canadians were recruited to serve in various fields in Southeast Asia as part of the British Special Operations Executives.¹⁰

Chinese-Canadians and the Special Operation Executive

The Special Operation Executive (henceforth SOE) was one of two British secret organizations where Canadians volunteered to gain entry into occupied territory as they worked behind enemy lines in both German-occupied Europe and later Japanese-occupied Asia.¹¹ Those that were recruited to work with the SOE had to work in complete secrecy due to the sensitive nature of the work. At its peak in 1944, there were about 14,000 members serving in different parts of Europe and Asia as secret agents. They underwent rigorous training that included dangerous tasks such as parachute jumping, mountain climbing, the use of high explosives, and

⁸ Patricia Roy, *The Triumph of Citizenship: The Japanese and Chinese in Canada, 1941-67* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 150.

⁹ "Special Projects: Force 136," accessed April 13, 2017, <http://www.ccmms.ca/features/the-story-of-force-136/>.

¹⁰ "Special Projects."

¹¹ "Uncommon Courage," accessed April 10, 2017, <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/second-world-war/uncommon-courage#canheroes>.

silent ling among many other skills.¹² Many were even told to prepare not to come out of the operation alive.

With the war in Asia, when the British looked for suitable candidates that would take the place of Caucasian agents, they turned to Canada. At the time, Canada was the only Commonwealth country that was not occupied by Japan and also had a sizeable Chinese population.¹³ The Chinese, were actively recruited by the SOE to join this special force. For the Chinese, who had been denied the right to vote, citizenship, or to serve in the armed forces, this was a new kind of reality. Through this faction of the SOE, hundreds of Chinese-Canadians were able to volunteer and fight in the war, ultimately leading to the breakdown of anti-Asian legislation and enabling them to be looked at as Canadian citizens.¹⁴

One of the most daring operations with the SOE was Operation Oblivion, which later became Force 136. For this operation, 13 Chinese-Canadians were recruited for a mission that would take them to Hong Kong in an attempt to “frustrate the Japanese”.¹⁵ Operation Oblivion was eventually disbanded when the war in the Pacific was put under American responsibility, but Force 136 lived on and sent these specially trained Chinese-Canadians to Malaya, Borneo, Singapore and other Japanese-occupied areas. Many of the tasks that were performed by those in Force 136 included sabotage activities, liberating prisoner-of-war camps, as well as maintaining order once Japanese units surrendered.¹⁶ For many of the operatives that served in Force 136,

¹² “Uncommon Courage.”

¹³ Roy MacLaren, *Canadians Behind Enemy Lines, 1939-1945* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 184.

¹⁴ “Uncommon Courage,” accessed April 10, 2017, <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/second-world-war/uncommon-courage#canheroes>.

¹⁵ Larry Wong, “The Canadian Chinese Exclusion Act and the Veterans Who Overcame It,” *Chinese America: History and Perspectives* (2007): 220.

¹⁶ “Special Projects: Force 136,” accessed April 13, 2017, <http://www.ccmms.ca/features/the-story-of-force-136/>; “Uncommon Courage,” accessed April 10, 2017, <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/second-world-war/uncommon-courage#canheroes>.

this was not only pivotal for the war effort in the Pacific, but also helped to improve the status of Chinese-Canadians back at home.

Victory Achieved: What This Meant for Chinese-Canadians

Once the war at the front ended, the war for equal rights continued as Chinese-Canadian veterans lobbied for the rights to vote and citizenship. A big moment of victory came when the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1947. This allowed for Chinese-Canadians to finally vote, and also paved the way for more inclusion in the workplace and professional societies such as law and medicine.¹⁷

One of the great success stories for Chinese-Canadians who served in the Second World War is that of Douglas Jung. Jung was born in Victoria in 1924 and was one of the thirteen men that were picked for Operation Oblivion. After serving as part of Force 136 when Operation Oblivion was cancelled, he returned to Canada to attend law school. He eventually became a lawyer and went on to pursue provincial politics as the Conservative candidate for the constituency of Vancouver Centre. Despite his loss in provincial politics, Jung was undeterred, and went on to run in the 1957 federal election and won, making Jung the first Chinese-Canadian member of Parliament. Jung was also appointed by then prime minister John Diefenbaker as the Canadian delegate to the United Nations. During his time in office, Jung fought for his fellow Chinese-Canadians by passing the controversial amnesty program which helped nearly 12,000 Chinese adjust their status. He also helped the nation's population by changing the rules around

¹⁷ Wong, "The Canadian Chinese Exclusion Act," 221.

old age pension, pushed for the formation of the coast guard and changed income tax laws so that students could deduct their tuition.¹⁸

The Second World War had a profound impact on all those living in Canada and fighting abroad. This also solidified Canada's position on the world stage as a key force during World War II in various operations, where the Chinese-Canadians serving in the SOE played a key contribution. Jung was one of many Chinese-Canadians that were able to go on to make contributions to Canadian society, as well as one of the 600 that volunteered to fight for Canada during the Second World War. Through the brave actions and of these Chinese-Canadian men and women, an entire population was given the rights to vote and citizenship. In the post-war era, Canada was able to take a step away from its racist attitudes towards a more inclusive and multi-cultural society, recognizing all ethnicities as part of Canada.

¹⁸ "I Am The Canadian Delegate," *Douglas Jung*, accessed April 14, 2017, <http://www.ccmms.ca/veteran-stories/army/douglas-jung/>.

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