

Literary activities of early Chinese in Canada: the transformation of classical poetry in the Diaspora

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Until the late 1970s, the Chinese in Canada suffered from two systematic discriminations: the notorious Head Tax (1885-1923) and the Exclusion Act (1923-1947) by the host country; and the political persecution of their families in their homeland by the new regime from 1949-1979. Both resulted in the long separation of families or no possibility of having a family at all, not counting many other losses. Hence, at least up to 1947, the Chinese community was basically a marginalized bachelor society. This community also suffered from two misconceptions: that they were merely uncultured laborers, and that they were not active. All they did was work, make money and send money back home.

In the course of researching through old literary materials - especially Chinese newspapers and magazines published in Canada in the early twentieth century, one is struck by the number and variety of cultural activities that the early Chinese immigrants organized, and their community's devotion to these activities, particularly during moments of crisis in Canada and in China.

This paper attempts to clarify the above misconceptions by examining the production of classical poetry by the early Chinese community from the late 19th century to the first half of the 20th century. It will begin with the wall poems written by early Chinese in the detention center in Victoria, B.C., to the huge *Collection of Poetry* in 1957 by *Chinese Times*. It will explore the major characteristics of these poems and particularly the incorporation of Canadian images in order to show the transformation of Chinese classical poetry in the diaspora.