

Chinese Women in the Northwest Americas

Panel Proposal submitted by CINARC (Chinese in Northwest America Research Committee)

Panel abstract: It is an understatement to say that the early passage to North America was difficult for Chinese women. Yet, in spite of very high cultural, gender, economic, and political barriers, many Chinese women made it to this side of the Pacific. Some stayed, moved away, or returned. Their North American journeys sometimes were continued by their daughters, often faced with an even more challenging cultural maze. Stories of their bitter struggles have been told by many writers. This panel, however, aims to raise the issue from a different perspective. Should those female Chinese pioneers be regarded solely as helpless victims? Did any fight back? What happened to those who did? Even if their only common goal was survival, surely some survived better than others, negotiating effectively with their harsh environments. If they had goals beyond survival, which they clearly often did, how did they step out of their boxes to achieve those goals? The presenters are interested not in abject failure but in strength and success.

Ben Bronson will examine two groups of “privileged” Chinese women in North America who strived to take traditional Chinese womanhood beyond regular expectation. While it is not too surprising to find Chinese ladies in the Northwest with Christian affiliations appearing publicly in connection with charitable works, one is astonished to find not only Europeanized women pushing themselves forward but also traditional women taking part in non-religious political activities. The most striking example of the latter is the members of the Chinese Ladies’ Empire Reform Association, who in much of the Northwest during the early 1900s crafted a Chinese-style emancipation that may have influenced China itself. Ben’s presentation will be based on data from archives, libraries, and newspapers published before 1925.

Larry Wong will review the lives of three Vancouver women: Nellie Yip (1878? -1949) Jennie Diment (1931-2011), and Sue Gee Jackman (1909-2008). All native-born, each of these ladies became a legend for doing things that no ordinary woman in the Chinese-Canadian world would have dared to attempt. Among many unusual acts, the first two married husbands not of their own ethnic groups. The last was a talented entrepreneur in her own right, succeeding in a part of Canada dominated by males, mostly white. Larry seeks to understand the psychology behind the strength shown by these strong, quite Chinese and very feminine, minds.

Chuimei Ho will look at the bottom of the Chinese social stratum in the Pacific Northwest where second wives, housemaids, and free-spirited individuals were often being lumped into the category of prostitutes, sometimes by immigration policies and often by cultural prejudice. Yet these women’s need for recognition and affiliation was no less than that of the average immigrant. How did they acquire a sense of psycho-social balance and take pride in being themselves while just about everything else worked against them? Chuimei will cite cases prior to 1920. Her data primarily come from the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

Titles:

1. Bennet Bronson: **Learning to play a public role through religions and politics: Early Chinese women in North America.**
2. Larry Wong: **Identity issues, Values, and Cultures as seen in Neillie Towers Yip, Sue Gee Jackman, and Jennie Wong Diment.**
3. Chuimei Ho: **Immigration Policies and Cultural Prejudice: Ladies who crossed the boundaries – “prostitutes” in the Northwestern region before 1920.**