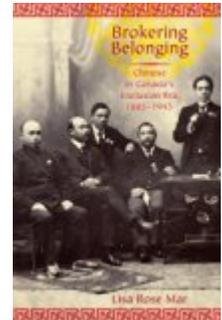


Lisa Rose Mar. *Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada's Exclusion Era, 1885-1945.*
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For a long time, history was written from the top down: accounts of great leaders and government policies dominated. Then, in the 1960s, the focus shifted to bottom-up perspectives to include the experience of ordinary people and their contributions and encounters with small and significant change in their times. Lisa Rose Mar takes a novel approach in her much-anticipated book *Brokering Belonging*, by producing a history made “from the middle” (p. 4).

In her short but riveting work, Mar explores the role that the Chinese community’s “middlemen” played during the exclusion era (1885-1945) in optimizing the restrictive immigration system for their own benefit and that of particular interests in their community and in bridging the divide between the dominant Anglophone European community in British Columbia and their own. Mar’s vision of Chinese middlemen is expansive and encompasses political, legal, economic, social, and intellectual brokers and smashes the conventional interpretation of the exclusion era as a time when the Chinese in Canada had little agency. The

result is a work that is vast in its implications and one that will surely provoke even more research questions.

In keeping with the scholarship of the past few decades that frames Chinese immigrants as transnational figures with ties across the Pacific rather than actors in a limited national drama (such as Madeline Hsu’s *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration between the United States and China 1882-1943* [2000]), Mar draws on a rich trove of English- and Chinese-language sources to demonstrate how Chinese brokering evolved from an elite-led effort to mass social protests over six decades of exclusion. Meticulously researched (even details from archival guides are noted), *Brokering Belonging* is divided into five chapters with each examining an aspect of brokering in the Chinese community during the exclusion era. The chapters also cover the implications of this bridging activity on Canada’s Anglophone (Mar’s term) and Chinese communities alike with peripheral attention to the impact of this brokering on the

transnational relationships between the Chinese in Canada and those in China and Hong Kong.

Mar opens with an exploration of the complex dynamics involving the Chinese interpreters hired to work with immigration officials to administer the head tax and the migrants who relied on the interpreters to facilitate their entry to Canada. Although Mar is primarily interested in examining the power struggles that occurred between merchant Yip On and legal interpreter David Lew as they fought over the coveted patronage position of interpreter, some of Mar's most important analysis is reserved for establishing the powerful position that interpreters, as middlemen, occupied in the immigration process. Canadian officials relied on the Chinese interpreter for managing the immigration program so that in practice exclusion was far from comprehensive as the interpreter could exercise great discretion in facilitating or impeding the entry of certain migrants. Estimates suggest that over two thousand illegal immigrants made their way into Canada during Yip's tenure as interpreter. Equally revealing, Mar points to the transnational nature of immigrant brokering and the lucrative financial remuneration that brokering portended. Migrants who purchased tickets from the Yip family in Hong Kong, for instance, received favorable treatment upon arrival in Vancouver with Yip as interpreter. As such, migrants and Canadian officials alike were heavily reliant on the interpreters to achieve their goals and objectives.

In the second chapter, Mar focuses on Lew's career as a legal interpreter and the mystery surrounding his assassination on September 24, 1924. Having introduced Lew to readers in the first chapter, as one of the key players in Vancouver's Chinese community, Mar nuances her assessment of Lew's ambitions by illustrating the unique place that legal brokers occupied in the Chinese community. As Chinese were ineligible to practice law, courtroom interpreters played a rather critical role in the lives of Chinese

claimants and defendants. Here, Mar introduces a theme to which she returns frequently in this work: namely, throughout the exclusion period different brokers used the power structures in place to their own advantage or to that of other members of the Chinese community. Mar argues that occasions on which the Chinese community sought to deal with justice issues internally should not be seen as "evidence of an unassimilated immigrant population" but rather as illustrative of how the Chinese perceived their community and Anglophone justice systems as part of a "single continuum" (pp. 57-58). In this manner Mar is taking an approach similar to that of Australian historian John Fitzgerald in his important work *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia* (2007) in which he contends that Australian policymakers perpetuated a language of difference for state-building purposes when, in fact, Chinese Australians were adept at embracing multiple systems of social existence and ignoring artificial distinctions of difference.

From her discussion of the power that legal brokers enjoyed in the Chinese community and in the face of the Anglophone majority, Mar shifts her focus to more widespread community activism as merchant effectiveness dwindled in the face of the 1923 Exclusion Act and the concurrent reduction in trade between Canada and China. In "Popularizing Politics," Mar focuses on the activities of the antisegregation movement from 1922 to 1923 in which broad-based community activism challenged the authority of both Anglophone and Chinese community leaders to segregate school attendance at public schools in Victoria and Vancouver. The protest stretched across the Pacific as organizers planned a boycott of British and Canadian goods to effect change. Here, Mar seems to leave her focus on the processes in which history is made from the middle to illustrate the importance of transnationalism to the Chinese experience in Canada. Rather than accepting the conventional explanation for the anti-segregation campaign and the protest for equal

rights “as an outcome of assimilation,” Mar sees it as a result of domestic contingencies and “a product of the Pacific World experience” (p. 71). In emphasizing the transnational aspects of the Chinese community’s experience in Canada, Mar destabilizes conventional understandings about the relationship of Chinese communities to provincial and federal authorities during the exclusion period. Implicit in Mar’s approach is the suggestion that it was the Chinese middlemen who best exploited their transnational ties who obtained the greatest advantages in Canada.

While Mar’s study is a marvelous portrait of a community in flux with a variety of actors maneuvering for power and influence, it is in demonstrating the Chinese community’s agency and influence in the face of dominant discourses and power structures that Mar’s arguments are most compelling. This is especially true of the fourth chapter in which Mar deftly illustrates how Chinese community leaders in Vancouver prepared for American researchers from the so-called Chicago School of Sociology, an influential research group under the direction of Robert Parks that almost singlehandedly determined the direction of the assimilationist debate in the United States and Canada for much of the twentieth century. Mar does a wonderful job of revealing how Chinese participants anticipated the researchers’ questions and prepared answers that spoke to a “propensity towards settlement,” while protecting their transnational ties from outside interests (p. 100). Mar’s richly subversive argument suggests that researchers from the Chicago School of Sociology and subsequent generations of scholars greatly misunderstood and misinterpreted the information provided to them by Chinese brokers who undertook to speak on behalf of the community as a whole and to shape scholarly perceptions in a specific light.

In the final chapter of *Brokering Belonging*, Mar contributes new understanding to the impact of the Second World War on the Chinese commu-

nity in Canada. Mar notes correctly that the vast majority of the historiography on this subject celebrates Chinese Canadian military service (after individuals were eventually permitted to enlist in 1944) as the prelude to obtaining citizenship and enfranchisement rights. While Mar acknowledges the importance of the military contribution to eventual enfranchisement, she also notes the great ambivalence with which the Chinese in Canada viewed the war effort. Mar makes the significant point that many Chinese Canadians and other ethnic minorities were opposed to conscription illustrating how the debate was more than a simple divide along linguistic and religious lines. Moreover, there were issues specific to the Chinese community that caused them to mobilize during the war, most important their ability to transmit remittances to families in China who suffered terrible privations after the Japanese invasion of 1937 and the subsequent civil war. Chinese workers in Canada lobbied for income tax reform and unionized in unprecedented numbers. By emphasizing the social protest aspects of the wartime Chinese experience in Canada, Mar’s intervention interrupts the traditional narrative of a progressive march from military service to citizenship rights and social justice in the postwar period.

Brokering Belonging affirms recent historiographical trends that emphasize the unsettled nature of many migrant experiences in Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and indeed, in the present by drawing attention to the transnational nature of immigrant lives. Throughout *Brokering and Belonging*, Mar produces evidence of brokers relying on transnational connections and pursuing transnational activities such as boycotts to obtain domestic benefits and enabled brokers such as Yip On and David Lew to position themselves as leaders within the Chinese community. Mar’s focus on the transnational impact on the individual dwindles as she moves into discussions of the mid-twentieth century, leaving one to wonder how transnational ties shaped the experience of the Chinese in Cana-

da in the postexclusion era and particularly after the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949. Mar observes that *Brokering Belonging* leaves many questions unanswered and provides a grocery list of potential projects for future scholars, including the connections between Chinese Canadian politics and Chinese Americans' relations with political machines, the connection between "insider" and "outsider" forms of dispute resolution, and the circulation of politics within the Pacific world. Nevertheless, a more detailed discussion of the residual effects, if any, of brokering from the exclusion era would remind readers of brokering's impact on the Chinese in Canada but on the larger political processes as well. Such insights could contribute to contemporary discussions on the role of ethnic groups and candidates in the Canadian political process, such as those by Caroline Andrew, John Biles, Myer Siemiatycki, and Erin Tolley, in their edited collection *Electing a Diverse Canada: The Electoral Representation of Immigrants, Minorities and Women* (2008) and Irene Bloemraad, *Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada* (2006).

Brokering Belonging illustrates the difficulty that confronts all historians of migration who adopt a transnational approach: how to reconcile global aspects of the history with national ones? It is a delicate balance and a certain tension pervades the text, for in fact, Mar is attempting to demonstrate the importance of brokering in several different contexts: in terms of the dynamism of the Chinese community, vis-à-vis dominant power structures, as a bridge between public spheres separated by language and in perpetuating transnational ties. The result is sometimes inconsistent with one aspect of brokering eclipsing others or the causal relationship between certain actors and events becoming muddled. For instance, while Mar does a marvelous job of situating the influence of brokers within the Chinese community, it is less clear how Anglophone authorities viewed the brokers they were engaged

with, particularly Yip On and David Lew. What did the prime minister, Wilfrid Laurier, make of his 1905 meeting with Lew? Examples of how officials in Ottawa, Victoria, or Vancouver understood or assessed the interpreters' role would have reinforced Mar's argument about the pivotal role that the middlemen played in bridging separate spheres.

Overall, Mar embraces the challenges and opportunities presented by a transnational perspective. By using transnational lives and experiences to inform our understanding of the Chinese experience in Canada, Mar offers a convincing portrait of how transnationalism and national experiences intersect and effectively broadens the scope of the national lens. In Mar's hands, the process of making history from the middle becomes a riveting and compelling glimpse into the inner workings of a community and one that dispels impressions of homogeneity and passivity among the Chinese in Canada during the exclusion era.

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