

BETWEEN SOUTH CHINA AND BRITISH COLUMBIA: *Life Trajectories of Chinese Women*

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INTRODUCTION

UNLIKE STUDIES OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION, which focus on either the sending community or the receiving community, this article examines the links between these two communities. Using a variety of sources, it pieces together the life trajectories of peasant women from the *qiaoxiang*¹ of the Pearl River Delta region of South China² from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. It includes those who made it to Canada as well as those who stayed behind in their home villages. The intention is to generalize about the ways of thinking and the behavioural patterns of Chinese village women on opposite sides of the Pacific Ocean, and to provide a context within which their life trajectories can be understood.

Mainstream histories and official documents in Canada and China are not helpful when it comes to depicting the lives of Chinese women in the earlier period.³ They tend to focus on voluntary associations, community leaders, or men. It is therefore necessary to combine such accounts with unofficial and personalized ones. Despite problems

¹ For the purpose of this article, mandarin (*pinyin* transliterations) will be used for names of places and standard Cantonese (Meyer Wempe system) will be used for colloquial terms describing types of people in the Pearl River Delta region.

² Up until the late 1960s, most Chinese in Canada could trace their ancestry to eight counties in the Pearl River Delta Region of Guangdong Province: Taishan, Xinhui, Kaiping, Enping (known collectively as *Siyi*, or Four Counties); Nanhai, Shunde, and Panyu (known collectively as *Sanyi*, or Three Counties); and Zhongshan. These are the well-documented *qiaoxiang* (Overseas Chinese homelands). See David Chuen-yan Lai, "Home County and Clan Origins of Overseas Chinese in Canada in the Early 1880s," *BC Studies* 27, 1 (1975): 3-29.

³ For a critique of Mainland Chinese sources, see Alan Tan, "Jinshanxiang Shou Kongwei: Wuyi Geyao Zhong de Qiaonjuan Funu [Gold Mountain Trunk Accompanies the Empty Bedroom: Folksongs of Overseas Chinese Wives in Wuyi District]" in *Qiaoxiang Wenhua Tansuo* [An Exploration of the Culture of Overseas Chinese Home Communities], ed. Li Zang (Guangzhoushi: Guangdong Renmin Chubanshe, 2004), 13-4.

with what Wayson Choy calls “creative fiction”⁴ – the mixing of fact with fiction, the distortion caused by some authors’ search for personal identity,⁵ and the fallibility of human memory⁶ – novels, memoirs, and even folksongs, when handled carefully, are a valuable resource for providing insights into the lived experiences of these women, their feelings and perceptions, and the ways in which they have been interpreted.⁷ For more recent times, however, oral histories, participant observations, social surveys, and interviews by social scientists offer a reliable source of information about women from South China who have British Columbia connections.⁸

Of all immigrant groups in Canada, those from China historically suffered the greatest immigration and emigration hurdles. In 1885, with a handful of exceptions given for merchants, missionaries, diplomats, students, and returning citizens, each Chinese entering the country had to pay a fifty dollar head tax. The head tax was increased to one hundred dollars in 1900 and to five hundred dollars in 1903. In 1923, the Chinese Immigration Act (popularly known as the Chinese Exclusion Act) was passed. It forbade Chinese labourers and their family members from entering the country. In addition, the exempt category of merchants was redefined to refer to only the largest business owners, although missionaries, diplomats, government students/scholars, and returning citizens were still allowed into the country. The Chinese Exclusion Act was lifted in 1947. However, it was replaced by another restrictive immigration act, under which only those ethnic Chinese

⁴ Wayson Choy, *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood* (Toronto: Viking Books, 1999), 1.

⁵ Some commentators theorize that third-generation ethnic Chinese female authors such as SKY Lee (*Disappearing Moon Café* [Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1990]) and Denise Chong (*The Concubine’s Children: Portrait of a Family Divided* [Toronto: Viking Books, 1994]) tend to demonize their grandmothers in order to assert their personal identities. See Mari Peepre, “Resistance and the Demon Mother in Diaspora Literature: SKY Lee and Denise Chong Speak Back to Motherland,” *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 18 (1998): 80–89; Susanne Hilf, *Writing the Hyphen: The Articulation of Interculturalism in Contemporary Chinese Canadian Literature* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), 81, 86, 99, 103.

⁶ Choy, *Paper Shadows*, 339–41; Chong, *The Concubine’s Children*, x–xii; Peepre, “Resistance and the Demon Mother,” 83.

⁷ See Lien Chao, *Beyond Silence: Chinese Canadian Literature in English* (Toronto: TSAR, 1997), 88–90; May Yee, “Chinese Canadian Women: Our Common Struggle,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 19, 3 (1987): 15; Peter Li, “The Use of Oral History in Studying Elderly Chinese-Canadians,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 17, 1 (1985): 71–72; Brandy Lien Worrall, ed., *Finding Memories, Tracing Routes: Chinese Canadian Family Stories* (Vancouver: Chinese Canadian Historical Society of British Columbia, 2006), viii–ix, 78–82.

⁸ My research interest in the *Siyi* area of the Pearl River Delta region dates back to the 1970s. Between the early 1970s and the late 1990s, I completed two oral history projects on elderly Chinese men and women residing in Vancouver and Victoria, respectively, and nine rounds of on-site interviews and social surveys in Kaiping and Taishan Counties.

who had Canadian citizenship were allowed to sponsor their spouses and unmarried, under-eighteen children to come to Canada. The onset of the Korean War in 1950 and the severing of diplomatic relationships between Canada and the People's Republic of China (PRC) effectively cut off direct immigration from China to Canada. Even though Canada gradually softened its discriminatory immigration policies against ethnic Chinese in 1955-56,⁹ finally allowing them to enter the country on equal grounds with other ethnic groups in 1967, there was no direct immigration from the PRC for another decade. This is because the Chinese government did not lift its own restrictions on emigration until Deng Xiaoping came to power in late 1978.¹⁰

Using immigration and emigration legislations as bench marks, I divide this article into four sections. The first depicts the life of different categories of pioneering Chinese women in British Columbia during the period between 1860 and 1947: merchants' spouses, domestic slaves (*mooi-tsai*), serving girls (*kei-toi-nui*), and prostitutes. The second section describes the experience of the generation of village women – wives of Chinese men in Canada (grass widows, or *shaang-kwa-foo*) – who were caught by drastic political changes in China and by restrictive immigration legislations and blatant white racism in Canada. The third section focuses on the current generation of out-of-town brides (*kwob-fau-san-neung*) from the Pearl River Delta region: those who were sponsored by Chinese grooms to come to British Columbia in the wake of the resumption of direct immigration from China to Canada in the late 1970s. The conclusion examines the personal and external factors that have affected the life trajectories of women from emigrant communities in South China, both past and present.

⁹ In 1955-56 landed immigrants (in addition to Canadian citizens) of Chinese ancestry could now sponsor family members to Canada; the age limit of dependent children was raised to twenty-one (as opposed to eighteen); and ethnic Chinese were allowed to sponsor their overseas fiancés into the country provided that the marriage took place within a month of the latter's entry. See Patricia E. Roy, *The Triumph of Citizenship: The Japanese and Chinese in Canada, 1941-1967* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 269-71.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive history of the Chinese in Canada, see Edgar Wickberg, ed., *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1982); Peter S. Li, *Chinese in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998).

PIONEER CHINESE WOMEN IN
BRITISH COLUMBIA (1860 TO 1947)

Wives

Chinese women were present in British Columbia as early as 1858.¹¹ However, patriarchal tradition in South China, British Columbia's frontier conditions, white racism, and restrictive immigration legislations combined to keep Chinese wives a small minority in Canada until the late 1940s.¹² According to official statistics, between 1871 and 1902 only 0.7 percent of the total China-born population in Canada was made up of wives.¹³

In accordance with Chinese polygamous tradition, first wives usually stayed home in the village to manage family affairs while secondary wives (concubines) accompanied their husbands to Canada to satisfy their sexual needs and to produce additional male heirs.¹⁴ Denise Chong's grandmother May Ying, for example, was a concubine who worked in Canada, and her wages went to support the primary wife at home. Another pioneer woman, depicted in Dora Nip and Margaret Wong's documentary *Under the Willow Tree*, was also a concubine. After her husband's death, she took the children to his home village, but they

¹¹ Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 47; Tamara Adilman, "A Preliminary Sketch of Chinese Women and Work in British Columbia, 1858-1950," in *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women*, ed. Gillian G. Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1992), 33; Women's Book Committee, Chinese Canadian National Council, *Jin Guo: Voices of Chinese Canadian Women* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1992), 18; Dora Nip and Margaret Wong, *Under the Willow Tree: Pioneer Chinese Women in Canada* (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1997).

¹² Peter S. Li, "Immigration Law and Family Patterns: Some Demographic Changes among Chinese Families in Canada, 1885-1971," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 12, 1 (1980): 63-4; Li, *Chinese in Canada*, 64-5; Anthony B. Chan, *Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1983), 50-1; Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 26, 80-1; Yuen-Fong Woon, "The Voluntary Sojourner among the Overseas Chinese: Myth or Reality?" *Pacific Affairs* 56, 4 (1983): 673-90.

¹³ For official records, see Li, *Chinese in Canada*, 23, 64; Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 26; David Chuen-yan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1988), 44. Unofficial statistics are hard to come by. Evidence from personal memoirs and family histories seems to show that many young Chinese women entered Canada under the "returning citizen category." These are the "paper brides" or "paper daughters" who purchased birth certificates from Canadian citizens outside the country. See Choy, *Paper Shadows*; Wayson Choy, *The Jade Peony* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1995); and Wayson Choy, *All That Matters* (Toronto: Anchor Books, 2005); Chong, *The Concubine's Children*; and Lee, *Disappearing Moon Café*. See also Paul Yee, *Salt Water City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), 124.

¹⁴ Yee, *Salt Water City*, 40; Madeline Y. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration between the United States and South China, 1882-1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 117; Tan, "Jinshanxiang Shou Kongwei," 8-9.

were not given a fair share of his inheritance, so she eventually took them back to Canada.¹⁵

Whether as primary wives or as concubines, few married Chinese women in Canada led comfortable, carefree lives. Before the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1923, those categorized as “merchants’ wives” were not necessarily “well off” as “merchants” often operated very small businesses.¹⁶ Moreover, not all Chinese women were married to merchants. Of ninety-two Chinese wives in Victoria in 1902, for example, sixty-one were married to merchants, twenty-eight to labourers, two to Protestant missionaries, and one to an interpreter.¹⁷ The grandmothers of both Denise Chong and Wayson Choy were married to wage earners.¹⁸

Chinese wives of this generation not only took care of household members but also performed paid and unpaid labour to help with household finances. Some were unpaid workers for spousal businesses, while others worked as home sewers, seamstresses, or dressmakers for tailors in Chinatown. They worked long hours and received low wages, but their extra income helped feed their families.¹⁹

The experiences of the mothers of the seven women interviewed by Nip and Wong in *Under the Willow Tree* highlight the loneliness and isolation of Chinese housewives during this early period. Originally from poor families in China, these women were involved in arranged marriages with railway workers, coal miners, and proprietors of hand laundries, general or grocery stores, and small restaurants in Canada. After joining their husbands between 1880 and 1913, they cared for numerous children (from eight to thirteen) and kept house in very cramped quarters above Chinese businesses in Chinatown. To combat their loneliness, they would talk out the window to the Chinese housewife next door. They longed to return to China but did not have the means to do so, and they quietly submitted to their fate.

These women would appear to be passive victims of economic exploitation and patriarchal oppression. Family memoirs and novels, however, seem to challenge such a grim picture. Choy’s step-grandmother, for

¹⁵ Chong, *The Concubine’s Children*; Nip and Wong, *Under the Willow Tree*.

¹⁶ Adilman, “A Preliminary Sketch,” 318. Before the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1923, redefined the category “Chinese merchant,” many self-employed Chinese males claimed “merchant status” in order to be exempted from the exorbitant head taxes imposed by Canadian immigration authorities. Even some employees and fellow villagers succeeded in entering Canada as “merchants” by claiming to be “partners” of small Chinese business operators.

¹⁷ Li, *Chinese in Canada*, 63-4.

¹⁸ Choy’s grandfather and father were both crew members of steamships, and Chong’s grandfather was a casual labourer. See Choy, *Paper Shadows*; and Chong, *The Concubine’s Children*.

¹⁹ Adilman, “A Preliminary Sketch,” 309-11, 316-8, 320.

example, is depicted as a strong-willed woman who forced a separation with Choy's grandfather and forbade the children to visit him. Even Choy's mother, who worked stuffing sausages in a Chinese factory, ignored her husband's pleas and continued to watch Cantonese opera and to play mahjong with her friends throughout the night. In families of Chinese wage earners, with the men absent for varying intervals working on steamboats, in mining camps, in lumber mills, or in salmon canneries, the women could become de facto heads of the household.²⁰

If the wives of Chinese working-class men were neither submissive nor secluded, what about their counterparts in merchant households? Again, family memoirs and fiction seem to point to the presence of some strong women. For example, Nip and Wong's documentary depicts one pioneer woman who was able to successfully manage her husband's business after his death even though she was unskilled and could not speak English. With the help of older children, she managed to pay off his debts and, even during the Great Depression, was never in need of welfare. In SKY Lee's novel *Disappearing Moon Café*, two women, Mui Lan and Fong Mei (mother-in-law and daughter-in-law), are strong merchant wives in a super-rich family in Vancouver's Chinatown. Both eventually become active managers of their family businesses.²¹

However, in the New World, even these same strong women could not escape being victims and agents of Confucian patriarchy. In Lee's aforementioned novel, Mui Lan, the lonely wife of Wong Gwei Chang, seeks pleasure in using patriarchal power to oppress her daughter-in-law Fong Mei, a "paper bride" who failed to give birth after five years of marriage. To get herself out of the situation, Fong Mei has an affair and produces three illegitimate children. She, in turn, victimizes her two daughters, one of whom is driven to suicide.²²

²⁰ Choy, *Paper Shadows*, 27, 34, 97, 167, 247, 284-7, 293-5, 300-2, 309-10. Choy believes that, in the pre-1947 period, Chinese wives in Vancouver were far less secluded than were their counterparts in Victoria. According to him, those in Vancouver tended to work outside the home and had active social lives with other wives in Chinatown.

²¹ Nip and Wong, *Under the Willow Tree*; Lee, *Disappearing Moon Café*, 59, 134.

²² For an in-depth analysis of the struggle for domestic power among different generations of Chinese Canadian women in Lee's novel, see Peepre, "Resistance and the Demon Mother," 82-5; Hilf, *Writing the Hyphen*, 107-9; Lien Chao, "Constituting Minority Canadian Women and Subcultures: Female Characters in Selected Chinese Canadian Literature," in *The Other Woman: Women of Colour in Contemporary Canadian Literature*, ed. Makeda Silvera (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1995), 349-50; Lien Chao, "As Agents and as Perspective: Female Characters in *Disappearing Moon Café*," in *Intersections: Issues of Race and Gender in Canadian Woman's Writing*, ed. Coomi S. Vivana and Barbara Godard (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1996), 224-5, 228-9; Chao, *Beyond Silence*, 99.

Other novels, memoirs, and documentaries also show the strong prejudice that pioneer Chinese women had against their (local-born) daughters. In his two novels about the same Chinatown family, Choy depicts the tension felt by Stepmother when she gave birth to a female child, Jook-Liang. He also describes the constant put-downs suffered by Jook-Liang at the hands of Grandmother (Poh Poh), once a slave girl in China who became the matriarch of the family in Canada. In her family memoir, Chong shows the psychological and physical abuse suffered by her mother Hing at the hands of Grandmother May Ying, who vented her frustration at having given birth to three daughters in a row. Even Nip and Wong's documentary, which gives the most sympathetic depiction of early pioneer Chinese women, describes the disappointment they felt at having given birth only to daughters. One woman even wanted to give away her third daughter. The video also shows the prejudicial treatment of female children: daughters were sent to Chinese schools but not public schools because they were to be returned to China for marriage. Some were held back from school to take care of younger siblings or were forced to work to finance their brothers' high school education.²³

Chinese Women in Bondage

Other than housewives, there were also Chinese women in British Columbia who arrived through brokers who bought them from their parents. Some were subsequently sold to well-off Chinese families in Canada to be domestic slaves (*mooi-tsai*), others were sold to Chinatown tea houses to work as serving girls (*kei-toi-nui*), and still others were forced into prostitution.²⁴ To satisfy immigration requirements, soon-to-be domestic slaves were registered as "daughter" or "adopted daughter," while those meant to be serving girls or prostitutes were designated as "merchant's wife."²⁵

²³ Choy, *The Jade Peony*; *All That Matters*; Chong, *The Concubine's Children*; Nip and Wong, *Under the Willow Tree*. For similar instances of prejudices against daughters, see also Yee, *Salt Water City*, 67-9; Adilman, "A Preliminary Sketch," 327-8.

²⁴ One has to be aware of possible confusion in various designations. Not all domestic helpers were *mooi-tsai*; not all waitresses were *kei-toi-nui*; and not all *kei-toi-nui* were prostitutes (see Adilman, "A Preliminary Sketch," 320). Choy's mother, for example, was neither a *mooi-tsai* nor a *kei-toi-nui* before she married Choy's father, even though she was hired initially as household help for step-grandmother and worked as a waitress on the side during her time off (see Choy, *Paper Shadows*). Song Ang, in Lee's novel *Disappearing Moon Café*, is not a *kei-toi-nui* in a tea house but an ordinary waitress in a respectable café.

²⁵ Choy, *Paper Shadows*, 297-8; Adilman, "A Preliminary Sketch," 312; Yee, *Salt Water City*, 47, 95; Nip and Wong, *Under the Willow Tree*.

The trafficking of women was not uncommon in South China,²⁶ and this practice was extended to North America, first appearing in the “meat market” of San Francisco. By the early twentieth century, wealthy merchants or brothel dealers in Victoria and Vancouver were directly importing women from China. The sponsors paid five hundred dollars to twenty-five hundred dollars for each woman, plus head taxes, passage costs, and other travel expenses. They recovered such costs plus interest by exploiting these women, and they made a huge profit.²⁷

Of the Chinese women sold into servitude in British Columbia, those working as *kei-toi-nui* were the most fortunate. Existing literature shows that they usually made good money serving tables in Chinatown tea houses – twenty to twenty-five dollars per week plus tips, which was much more than the dollar-a-day earned by a casual Chinese male labourer. However, part of their wages went to the owner of the tea house and the man who sponsored them into the country. *Kei-toi-nui* could make even more money on the side if they agreed to spend the night with a client, but it was not part of their contracted work.²⁸

Chong’s family history provides a glimpse into the life of a *kei-toi-nui*, May Ying. She is purchased as a concubine by Chan Sam, who puts her to work as a *kei-toi-nui* to pay off the expense he incurred to bring her to North America. Subsequently, he collects her wages every payday and uses them to finance his household in his home village. May Ying, however, is not a submissive concubine. Despite her low status as a serving girl, her earning power and strong will eventually result in a role reversal in her relationship with Chan Sam, who is a casual labourer. She begins to behave like a typical male Chinese sojourner of her time: gambling, drinking, sleeping around, and openly keeping a lover. The case of May Ying shows that, in a New World situation, traditional values, customs, and family structures can break down.²⁹

The conditions of *mooi-tsai* in affluent Chinese households in British Columbia varied a great deal. These women could be anywhere from seven to twenty-five years old upon arrival. Some were well-treated and

²⁶ For example, during an interview in the 1970s, one elderly Chinese man in Victoria told me that, in the early twentieth century, he sold his sister to raise the head taxes required to come to Canada.

²⁷ Lucie Cheng, “Freed, Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth Century America,” *Signs* 5, 1 (1979): 3-29; Cassandra Kobayashi, “Sexual Slavery in Canada: Our Herstory,” *Asianadian* 1, 3 (1978): 7; Chan, *Gold Mountain*, 81-4; Adilman, “A Preliminary Sketch,” 313-4; Yee, *Salt Water City*, 91.

²⁸ Yee, *Salt Water City*, 95-99; Adilman, “A Preliminary Sketch,” 319-20.

²⁹ Chong, *The Concubine’s Children*. See also Chao, *Beyond Silence*, 112, 119; Hilf, *Writing the Hyphen*, 82-3.

were provided with decent clothing and living space. They ate with the family, were addressed as Big Sister by the children, and, sometimes, were allowed to go to school. Others were abused, exchanged, forcibly married off, or resold when their owners returned to China.³⁰

Of Chinese women in bondage in Canada during this period, prostitutes were the most geographically widespread. Chinese prostitution thrived as early as 1858 in small towns along the mining trails, along the Canadian Pacific Railway, near lumber mills in the BC interior, and in coastal cities such as Vancouver, Victoria, New Westminster, and Nanaimo. In these major cities, Chinese prostitutes coexisted with white prostitutes in red light districts, both serving clients that cut across racial lines.

Despite the negative image portrayed by the English media, which revelled in describing syphilitic women luring young white men to eternal damnation,³¹ there were very few Chinese prostitutes. In British Columbia in 1885 there were only 70 in a Chinese population of 10,550. In Victoria in 1902, white prostitutes outnumbered Chinese prostitutes by 150 to 4. In small towns in British Columbia during the same year, Chinese sex workers numbered 5 or fewer.³²

Chinese prostitutes were of all ages. The most coveted were children, ranging from age six to the late teens. Research indicates that most prostitutes operated out of Chinese-owned brothels or gambling houses rather than on the streets. In general, they could be divided into two subcategories: (1) high-status prostitutes serving rich Chinese merchants and adventure-seeking Caucasian males, and (2) "crib prostitutes" working in shabby establishments serving downtrodden Chinese wage-earning labourers.³³

While most Chinese in British Columbia turned a blind eye to the conditions of women sold into servitude, in 1883, the Methodist Women's Missionary Society in Victoria established a rescue home for Chinese women to help runaway Chinese domestic slaves and prostitutes. Upon taking shelter in this establishment, these women were given vocational training and job placements. Some were married off to Chinese labourers

³⁰ Nip and Wong, *Under the Willow Tree*, 1997; Adilman, "A Preliminary Sketch," 312-6; Yee, *Salt Water City*, 45-6.

³¹ Peter W. Ward, *White Canada Forever* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978), 8-9.

³² Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 74-5; Chan, *Gold Mountain*, 80; Adilman, "A Preliminary Sketch," 313.

³³ Chan, *Gold Mountain*, 80-4; Adilman, "A Preliminary Sketch," 313-4; Choy, *Paper Shadows*, 72-4; Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 39, 67-8; Nip and Wong, *Under the Willow Tree*; Yee, *Salt Water City*, 99.

who had earlier converted to Methodism. Besides white missionaries, the Chinese Benevolent Association (established in Victoria in 1884) also helped these women by returning them to their natal families in China or by sending them to Tung Wah Hospital Charity Society in Hong Kong to be married off to local men.³⁴

Be they housewives, wage earners, serving girls, prostitutes, or domestic slaves, this generation of pioneer Chinese women in Canada contributed significantly to the Pacific war efforts (1937-45). They volunteered to team up with non-Chinese women to conduct fund-raising activities, which involved selling war bonds and collecting public donations to help fight Japanese aggression in the Pacific Theatre. Armed with pins and labels, they congregated outside Chinatowns on tag days, standing on busy street corners in major cities. They also folded bandages in church basements, knitted endless socks and sweaters for soldiers, and packed first-aid kits in Chinese association halls. It was a remarkable experience as, for the first time in their lives, many Chinese housewives found themselves outside the confines of their homes.³⁵

WIVES AND DAUGHTERS OF GOLD MOUNTAIN GUESTS

While pioneer Chinese women were making their mark in the Chinese community in British Columbia, they constituted but a small minority of those connected to the area. Over 90 percent of the wives and daughters of Chinese men in Canada were left to fend for themselves in the *qiaoxiang* of South China.³⁶

In some villages in *Siyi* (Four Counties),³⁷ almost all the able-bodied males had left for North America or Australia, leaving behind senior parents, wives, sisters, adult daughters, and very young children. The

³⁴ Nip and Wong, *Under the Willow Tree*; Yee, *Salt Water City*, 45; Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 39, 122; Lai, *Chinatowns*, 206-7; Chan, *Gold Mountain*, 82-3; Adilman, "A Preliminary Sketch," 314-6.

³⁵ Choy, *Paper Shadows*, 57-64; Nip and Wong, *Under the Willow Tree*.

³⁶ Zhang Guohong, *Lingnan Wuyi* [South China's Five Counties district] (Beijing: Joint Publishing Company, 2005): 206, 210-4; Yip Yuen Chung, *The Tears of Chinese Immigrants* (Dunvegan, ON: Cormorant Books, 1990), 52-3; Li, *Chinese in Canada*, 5, 69-70. Even before the Chinese Exclusion Act, when it was still possible to bring family members to Canada, most Chinese labourers preferred to sponsor sons, brothers, nephews, grandsons, or grand nephews rather than wives, sisters, or daughters. The same was true of Chinese merchants, even though they did not have to pay a head tax. According to an estimate, between 1885 and 1902, 5 percent of the Chinese in Canada were classified as merchants and yet less than 1 percent of the men sponsored their wives (Li, *Chinese in Canada*, 63).

³⁷ *Siyi* (Four Counties) is a collective term for four contiguous counties in the Pearl River Delta region – namely, Taishan, Xinhui, Kaiping, and Enping. Before the 1960s, more than

absentee men were known colloquially as “Gold Mountain guests” (*kam shaan haak*),³⁸ while their wives were known as “grass widows” (*shaang-kwa-foo*).

Grass Widows

In emigrant communities in South China, it might be arranged for a village woman as young as sixteen to marry a Gold Mountain guest either shortly before he left home or during his first return visit. In some cases in which the groom could not be present, he was represented in the wedding ceremony by a rooster. After the wedding, the wife might see her husband once or twice until he finally returned home to retire. During his prolonged absence, she single-handedly took care of his parents, worshipped his ancestors, and raised children (some of whom had been adopted or purchased) in the extended household.³⁹

Like other village women, most grass widows remained chaste throughout their lives. Even if a grass widow wanted to be unfaithful, it was difficult for her to find an eligible village man who was not a relative of her husband. Even rumours of infidelity were enough to ensure that a grass widow would be severely punished. If these rumours were proven, the woman could be put to death or driven out of the village without her children.⁴⁰

Grass widows often lived in constant fear that their husbands would abandon them and remarry overseas. However, this seldom happened in Gold Mountain as there were so few eligible Chinese women.⁴¹ Additionally, interracial marriages in Gold Mountain were typically taboo for both Chinese and mainstream societies. A grass widow's marriage could be dissolved either because the Gold Mountain guest died overseas or because he was so destitute that he could not continue to send remittances and so voluntarily cut off all contact. When that

two-thirds of the Chinese in Canada came from this part of the Pearl River Delta region. See Lai, “Home County and Clan Origins,” 3-29.

³⁸ “Gold Mountain” refers to the United States, Canada, or Australia because Chinese men first entered each country in the wake of a gold rush.

³⁹ Zhang, *Lingnan Wuyi*, 40, 43; Tan, “Jinshanxiang Shou Kongwei,” 9, 11, 13-4. Liu Zhongmin, *Huaqiao Shijia* [Saga of an Overseas Chinese Family] (Beijing: Zhongguo Xianzhen Nianjianshe Publications, 1999), 136-7.

⁴⁰ Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold*, 91-2, 106-8. See also Choy, *Paper Shadows*, 316-8, 335, for a description of the treatment of his grandmother, who was accused of having an affair in an emigrant community in Xinhui County in the early twentieth century.

⁴¹ For the lopsided sex ratio among Chinese in Canada during the pre-1947 period, see Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 14, 26, 209; Li, “Immigration Law and Family Patterns,” 62-4; Li, *Chinese in Canada*, 23; Adilman, “A Preliminary Sketch,” 326; Chan, *Gold Mountain*, 50; and Yee, *Salt Water City*, 49, 108.

happened, his wife would be forgiven for engaging a go-between to find herself another husband outside the village. She could remarry with the permission of the first husband's relatives, although any children from the marriage, particularly sons, would remain the property of their father's family.⁴²

While grass widows could be victims of patriarchal oppression, they often emerged as the de facto heads of households. Any visits by the husband were few and far between and were made in great haste, as his right to return to Canada could be revoked if he stayed home for more than two years.⁴³ Because his visits were so infrequent, his wife gained greater control over the children's upbringing and mate choice. Meanwhile, to his children, whenever he came home he was simply an intruder. In addition, if her parents-in-law died, the wife would become the major recipient of, and decision maker with regard to, overseas remittances. In an affluent overseas Chinese family, the primary wife remained at home in China, living in relative comfort in a grand foreign-style house, while concubines served her husband day to day in Gold Mountain. Rather than farming, she could rely on rental income from land purchased with her husband's overseas remittances.⁴⁴

This pattern was rudely interrupted by larger political forces over which the grass widows of South China had no control. After the Japanese occupied Hong Kong in December 1941, routes for contact and remittances from Gold Mountain were cut off. Lacking their working-age male family members, many in these villages starved to death or were forced to leave.⁴⁵ According to Chinese official statistics relating to this period, the death toll due to starvation and malnutrition in Taishan County alone was over 145,000 (or one-quarter of the total population), and about 50,000 women were displaced. Some of the grass widows remarried farmers in Western Guangdong Province or Guangxi Province in order to stay alive, while others were kidnapped and sold into prostitution by human traffickers.⁴⁶

⁴² Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold*, 118-21.

⁴³ Li, "Immigration Law and Family Patterns," 67.

⁴⁴ For detailed accounts of the lifestyle and status of women in *Siyi* before the Pacific War (1937-45), see Yuen-Fong Woon, "An Emigrant Community in the Ssu-Yi Area, Southeastern China 1885-1949: A Study in Social Change," *Modern Asian Studies* 18, 2 (1984): 294-302; Yuen-Fong Woon, *The Excluded Wife* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill University Press, 1998), 57-65. See also Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold*, 117.

⁴⁵ Tan, "Jinshanxiang Shou Kongwei," 13-4; Li, *Chinese in Canada*, 69; Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold*, 217.

⁴⁶ Taishan Qiaowu Bangongshi, ed., *Taishanxian Huaqiao Zhi* [A Chronicle of Overseas Chinese from Taishan County] (Taishan City: Taishan Overseas Chinese Affairs Office Publications, 1992), 166-9.

Canada lifted its Exclusion Act in 1947 and allowed Chinese who were Canadian citizens to sponsor their spouses and unmarried children under eighteen to immigrate into the country. The replacement Chinese Immigration Act, however, was still very restrictive.⁴⁷ Subsequently, as a result of Communist triumph in Mainland China in 1949 and the outbreak of the Korean War in the following year, all diplomatic ties between Canada and the People's Republic of China (PRC) were cut off, putting an end to direct immigration from China to this country. Some grass widows did escape to Hong Kong or Macao with their teenage children and were sponsored by their husbands to come to Canada. Others had to wait till the late 1970s, when direct immigration from Mainland China to Canada was again allowed.⁴⁸

Grass widows who remained in the PRC during the Maoist period (1949-78) suffered official harassment. Needing foreign currency, the Communist cadres strongly pressured them to write to their husbands or sons to send money, which, at one point was used to buy Anti-America, Aid Korea bonds. Those grass widows who owned a few acres of land before the revolution of 1949 were labelled landlords and had to face public "struggle meetings," where they faced humiliation and had their houses and lands confiscated. During the high tide of socialism (1955-56), all grass widows were forced into team farming. Many also suffered rounds of persecution during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) for having "overseas connections."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ The fundamental problems with the Chinese Immigration Act, 1947, are threefold: (1) The Chinese Exclusion Act, which lasted for twenty-four years (from 1923 to 1947), effectively cut off family life for over two decades, leaving, in 1947, very few Chinese men in Canada with China-born children under eighteen years of age; (2) up until 1955, only those Chinese with Canadian citizenship could apply for family reunification in Canada, which, owing to racial discrimination, was a tiny minority (see Adilman, "A Preliminary Sketch," 331; Roy, *The Triumph of Citizenship*, 171-2); and (3) despite many petitions by the Chinese community, the Canadian government consistently refused to accept independent immigrants or refugees from China or to widen the category of "family members" to include members of the extended family such as elderly parents, siblings, and adult children (see Roy, *The Triumph of Citizenship*, 263-72). As a result, even though many people from South China escaped to Hong Kong or Macao during this period, few could enter Canada legally until the mid-1960s. For official statistics of Chinese immigration to Canada between 1947 and 1967, see Li, *Chinese in Canada*, 95-96. Bear in mind, however, that these statistics do not include those entering illegally.

⁴⁸ Li, *Chinese in Canada*, 68, 96-7. According to Li's calculations, in 1941 there were 20,141 separated Chinese families in Canada. In 1951, after ten years, the number had been reduced slightly to 12,882. By 1961, twenty years later, there were still 5,380 separated families among the Chinese in Canada (Li, *Chinese in Canada*, 67).

⁴⁹ Glen D. Peterson, "Socialist China and the Huaqiao: Transition to Socialism in the Overseas Chinese Area of Rural Guangdong, 1949-1956," *Modern China* 14, 3 (1988): 309-55. Yee, *Salt Water City*, 108; Yip, *Tears of Chinese Immigrants*, 53-4. Yuen-Fong Woon, "From Mao to Deng: Life Satisfaction among Rural Women in an Emigrant Community in South China," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 25 (1990): 162. For dramatized accounts of what happened

Family Reunifications

Having crossed the Pacific, former grass widows who succeeded in entering Canada in the 1950s and 1960s found their lives fundamentally transformed. Having lived without a spouse for fifteen to thirty years, they had to deal with various problems readjusting to husbands they barely knew and, in some cases, also to second families in Canada.⁵⁰ Some gave birth again in their forties but were widowed when the children were still young. Lack of skills and inability to function in an official language made it difficult for them to find steady employment in Canada. Frequently, they put in long working hours labouring in their husbands' small businesses. Others (often after their husbands had died) took multiple manual jobs (e.g., sewing at home, cleaning fish at canneries, peeling shrimp, or picking potatoes or strawberries on farms) to help with their families' finances.⁵¹

A significant number of former grass widows came to Canada with teenage sons but without China-born daughters. During the period between 1947 and 1967, more sons than daughters were sponsored to Canada, partly because of widespread prejudice against females and partly because of the anticipated greater earning power of males. In fact, the birth certificates of these "excluded daughters" were often sold in Hong Kong.⁵²

The young men who entered Canada as dependent children were soon of marriageable age. Not having enough linguistic or social skills to meet eligible local-born Chinese girls or mainstream Canadians, they often looked across the Pacific for brides. After the newly established PRC government closed China's door to overseas emigration in 1950, Hong Kong became the focal point for the marriage market. Courtship was usually brief, and in some cases it simply involved picking from a collection of photographs of young women. These brides were known in the Chinese community as "COD (cash-on-delivery) wives" because

to Overseas Chinese families in South China during the Japanese Invasion (1937-45) and Land Reform (1951-53), see Chong, *The Concubine's Children*, 132-40, 182-9; Woon, *The Excluded Wife*, 67-85, 110-34.

⁵⁰ Chao, *Beyond Silence*, 90; Women's Book Committee, *Jin Guo*, 42-51; Yip, *The Tears of Chinese Immigrants*, 53-54. As mentioned before, some Chinese men brought their concubines to Canada and left the primary wife in the home village. Others remarried in Canada when, during the Pacific War (1937-45) or the Chinese Civil War (1945-49), they lost contact with their original families.

⁵¹ Yee, *Salt Water City*, 118-21; Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 69, 74.

⁵² Woon, *The Excluded Wife*, 175-8; Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 69-70.

the groom's family mailed the go-between "thank you" money upon the bride's arrival.⁵³

As a result of these family strategies, a typical Chinese household in British Columbia in the late 1950s consisted of a former grass widow in her late forties or early fifties busily taking care of young children. She probably lived with one China-born son in his early twenties and perhaps a daughter-in-law from Hong Kong, while her other adult children were left behind and were unable to emigrate. Although surprisingly little solid research has been conducted on the interpersonal dynamics of these households, one can imagine the huge cultural gap between the mother, her adult (usually male) children, and her much younger Canadian-born children, especially as, with regard to cultural orientation, the latter grew up to be full-fledged Canadians.

In the early years of their arrival in Canada, grass widows who emigrated from their old network of village women in South China usually found themselves socially isolated. In British Columbia, they were totally out of place in the male-focused Chinese community, where women were stared at if they went out on the streets by themselves.⁵⁴ By the late 1960s, they might again feel overwhelmed by another wave of immigrants from urban, sophisticated Hong Kong, whose modern Chinese middle-class values totally transformed the Chinatown sub-culture of "old timers."

In the 1980s, alongside the massive direct migration of elderly wives and adult children from South China to British Columbia, a small number of reunifications also took place in South China. Towards the end of their lives, couples separated for a period of over sixty years now lived together as husband and wife in their home villages. For them, readjustment was even more difficult than it was for those families who were reunited in Canada in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵⁵

It must be borne in mind that neither in British Columbia nor in South China were all couples reunited. Even in the 1980s, lonely elderly Chinese men in British Columbia still lived by themselves, faithfully remitting money to support wives they barely recognized and children

⁵³ Yee, *Salt Water City*, 118; Yip, *The Tears of Chinese Immigrants*, 78-9; Yuen-Fong Woon, "Social Discontinuities in North American Chinese Communities: Case of the Kwaan in Vancouver and Victoria, 1880-1949," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 14, 4 (1978): 448-9; Woon, *The Excluded Wife*, 211-5. According to my research, some "excluded daughters" came to Canada as overseas brides of young Chinese Canadian men and were therefore reunited with their natal families on Canadian soil via marriage immigration (which was legal after 1955).

⁵⁴ Yee, *Salt Water City*, 118-9.

⁵⁵ Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold*, 108-09, 117.

they had not seen for decades.⁵⁶ Concurrently, in emigrant communities in Taishan County, many households consisted of only grass widows in their eighties. All family members having left for overseas reunification, these women lived alone in foreign-style houses that had been returned to them by the post-Mao government.⁵⁷

OUT-OF-TOWN BRIDES
(KWOH-FAU-SAN-NEUNG),
1980 TO PRESENT

With the resumption of direct immigration from Mainland China to Canada in the late 1970s, former grass widows and excluded daughters were not the only women who were leaving South China for British Columbia. Increasingly, female out-migration in the *qiaoxiang* took the form of “out-of-town brides” who left home to join their grooms in Gold Mountain shortly after the wedding.⁵⁸ Such marriage migration faced few immigration hurdles. The PRC’s new Overseas Chinese policy no longer denounced marrying Overseas Chinese as “capitalist thinking.” *Kwoh-fau-san-leung* could easily obtain an exit visa to leave China,

⁵⁶ Li, “Immigration Law and Family Patterns,” 67; *The Chinese in Canada*, 69; Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 254-5.

⁵⁷ According to Chinese official statistics, between 1978 and 2004, three-hundred thousand people in *Siyi* had left the villages for overseas immigration (Zhang, *Lingnan Wuyi*, 214). For a description of households headed by grass widows in the 1980s, see Yuen-Fong Woon, “Qiaoxiang Mentality and Economic Development: A Comparative Study of Two Overseas Chinese Homelands in South China in the 1990s,” in *Diversified Migration Patterns of North America: Their Challenges and Opportunities*, ed. Chieko Kitagawa Otsuru (Osaka: Japan Centre for Area Studies, National Museum of Ethnology, 1997), 61; Woon, “From Mao to Deng,” 162; Graham E. Johnson, “Family Strategies and Economic Transformation in Rural China: Some Evidence from the Pearl River Delta,” in *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 127-31; Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold*, 217. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the era of grass widows in South China had faded into history. With the occupants having died or been sponsored overseas for family reunification, the magnificent foreign-style houses of the 1920s and 1930s stood empty, except for the ancestral altars located in the attics. However, as they were considered to be spiritual anchors for descendants, these buildings were seldom sold or rented out. Even now, many immigrant Chinese parents still insist that a North American-born son bring his bride to the native village to go through a second wedding ceremony at both the domestic altar and the village ancestral hall. For the latest update, see Tan, “Jinshanxiang Shou Kongwei,” 9, 13-14; Zhang, *Lingnan Wuyi*, 43, 126-7, 206, 210-6.

⁵⁸ “Out-of-town brides” are slightly different from other married Chinese women described earlier in this article. Unlike the “grass widows,” they leave the village shortly after the wedding ceremony to settle permanently in Gold Mountain. Unlike the pioneer Chinese women in the pre-1947 period, out-of-town brides are not secondary wives or concubines. One may compare the out-of-town brides to the COD wives who came to Canada predominantly from Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s, except that, in the case of the former, the young woman is selected by the man who goes back to his home community for a brief period of courtship.

while North American governments readily granted them permission to enter the country.⁵⁹

According to statistics kept by Taishan County's Marriage Registry, in the 1980s marriages involving foreign nationals from North America and local women amounted to 10.4 percent of marriages in the county. For *Siyi* as a whole, ten thousand people left as a result of overseas marriage migration between 1978 and 2004.⁶⁰

A significant number of out-of-town brides did not enter into "love marriages."⁶¹ Wu Xingci and Li Zhen, for example, estimate that, in Taishan County in the 1980s, only 52 percent of these brides were well acquainted with their grooms before they were sponsored to Gold Mountain. Based on his research in *Siyi* as a whole, Zhang Guohong estimates that, in the 1990s, the proportion of these love marriages was as low as 13 percent.⁶² In fact, in a large number of cases, a prospective bride was initially recommended to the groom by intermediaries (go-betweens, friends, or relatives) in either South China or Gold Mountain. The first meeting (and often the only meeting) occurred on the brief occasion when the man returned to his home community specifically to look for a marriage partner.

The grooms from Gold Mountain were not particularly rich by North American standards. Close to 90 percent of them did menial work for restaurants or held other blue-collar jobs. A significant number had previously been divorced or widowed. Their ages ranged between forty-seven and seventy-four when they remarried the young village woman of their choice. This resulted in significant mismatches in age. Only slightly more than half of the marriages involved a bride and groom

⁵⁹ Wu Xingci and Li Zhen, "Gum San Haak in the 1980s: A Study on Chinese Emigrants Who Returned to Taishan County for Marriage," *Amerasia* 14, 2 (1988): 29-30; Zhang Guohong, "Jiushiniandai Guangdong Wuyi Qiaoxiang Shewai Hunyin Xinyimin de Renkou Goucheng" [Demographic Composition of New Emigrants from Wuyi District, Guangdong Province, Who Married Foreign Nationals in the 1990s], *Nanfang Renkou* 4 (1996): 37; Woon, "Qiaoxiang Mentality," 60.

⁶⁰ Wu and Li, "Gum San Haak," 22-4; Zhang, *Lingnan Wuyi*, 214. Note that Wu and Li's statistics are compiled from Taishan County records in the 1980s. By contrast, Zhang collects statistics for a longer time span (late 1970s to 2004), and his research encompasses the whole of the *Siyi* area, of which Taishan is a part. See note 37 for the geographic boundary of *Siyi*.

⁶¹ Researchers in South China define the term "love marriages" as the level of acquaintance between the bride and the groom in youth or childhood (i.e., it is used to refer to those who resided in the same neighborhood, attended the same school, or worked in the same factory or production team).

⁶² Wu and Li, "Gum San Haak," 22-4; Zhang Guohong, "Jiushiniandai Guangdong Wuyi Qiaoxiang Xinyimin de Shewai Hunyin Guan" [Attitudes towards Marrying Foreign Nationals among the New Emigrants from Wuyi District, Guangdong Province, in the 1990s], *Nanfang Renkou* 2 (1997): 42. For the difference in data bases between Wu and Li's and Zhang's research, see note 60 above.

whose age gap was five or fewer years. In some extreme cases, brides were twenty to fifty years younger than the grooms. In addition, out-of-town brides tended to have a senior high school education or higher, while the grooms tended to have a junior high school education or lower.⁶³

Given these disparities, it is not surprising that, in Gold Mountain, considerable marital unhappiness has occurred and continues to occur. This is particularly the case with regard to young women who, in exchange for an imagined luxurious life and the possibility of sponsoring natal family members to the legendary Gold Mountain, marry someone for whom they have little affection, who is much older and less educated than they are, and whom they had met only briefly before marriage. Upon arrival, they are shocked at the economic hardship and the marginality of their husbands' occupations. Lacking certified skills (even though most have attained senior high education in China), these out-of-town brides often have to work hard in menial jobs, mostly in restaurants or garment factories, to augment the household budget.

Within the household, Confucian-style male chauvinism, economic insecurity, and low social status all play a part in the husband's often-abusive behaviour. The man expects his out-of-town bride to be grateful for his having sponsored her to Gold Mountain, and yet, at the same time, he is apprehensive that she might run away with a younger, richer, or more educated man once she settles down. As a result, the husband watches over her closely, retains her travel documents, and refuses to share his earnings. Knowing that his out-of-town bride depends on him for her residence status in the country and that she is eager to eventually sponsor members of her natal family to Gold Mountain, he threatens divorce or refusal to help apply for her landed immigrant status if she does not submit to his wishes.

Out-of-town brides do not usually report cases of spousal abuse to government agencies. Either they do not know where or how to get help or they fear deportation, particularly if they do not have legal immigration status. The Chinese community is by and large not particularly helpful or sympathetic to their plight. These brides are often seen as opportunistic in exploiting Canada's humane immigration programs to obtain permanent resident status.⁶⁴

⁶³ Wu and Li, "Gum San Haak," 24, 26, 30-2; Zhang, "Jiushiniandai Guangdong Wuyi Qiaoxiang Shewai Hunyin," 37-9; Ko-Lin Chin, "Out-of-Town Brides: International Marriage and Wife Abuse among Chinese Immigrants," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 25, 1 (1994): 53.

⁶⁴ Chin, "Out-of-town Brides," 56-63; Josephine Fong, "Where Do They Belong? The Fate of Chinese Immigrant Women," *Canadian Woman Studies* 19, 3 (1999): 67.

Currently, out-of-town brides from Mainland China are isolated and trapped. They face the cruel reality of having to struggle alone in Gold Mountain against economic exploitation, male dominance, and a precarious immigrant status. In this sense, their present situation is no different from that of the pioneer Chinese “housewives” in the pre-1947 period or the former “grass widows” who came to Canada in the 1950s and 1960s. Only time will tell whether the more open Canadian society and their higher education levels will eventually help out-of-town brides to rise above their current predicament.

LIFE TRAJECTORIES OF SOUTH CHINESE WOMEN, PAST AND PRESENT

The previous sections in this article provide an overview of the background and lived experience of Chinese women in the Pearl River Delta region of South China and in British Columbia from the 1860s to the 1950s, and from the 1980s to the present. This concluding section focuses on the similarities and differences that occur in their thinking and behaviour patterns. Specifically, it asks the following questions: Did these women have the option of marrying someone from Gold Mountain and, if so, could they choose either to stay behind in the home community after the wedding or to move overseas? If they could so choose, then what motivated them to make such important decisions? To answer these key questions, one needs to look at three types of factors – macro, meso, and micro⁶⁵ – and to examine their effects on the life trajectories of these two cohorts of South Chinese women.

During the period between the 1860s and the 1950s, the macro picture was one of desperation for the common people in China. Incessant internal or international power struggles included numerous imperialist intrusions and large-scale internal uprisings during the

⁶⁵ “Macro factors” are forces that originate in the larger national or international context; “meso factors” are forces that are unique to a particular community, such as the emigrant communities of the Pearl River Delta region; “micro factors” are forces that originate within households or individuals. For an elaboration of the three levels of analysis in the study of internal and international migration, see Monica Boyd, “Family and Personal Network in International Migration: Recent Development and New Agendas,” *International Migration Review* 23, 3 (1989): 630-80; R. Mansell Prothero and Murray Chapman, eds., *Circulation in Third World Countries* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 1-26; Ronald Skeldon, *Population Mobility in Developing Countries: A Reinterpretation* (London and New York: Belhaven Press, 1990); Charles H. Wood, “Structural Changes and Household Strategies: A Conceptual Framework for the Study of Rural Migration,” *Human Organization* 40, 4 (1981): 338-43.

late Qing dynasty through to the Republican Revolution, constant warfare among warlords, a full-scale Japanese invasion, prolonged civil war between Nationalists and Communists, and, finally, the various campaigns conducted under the radical Maoist regime. As a result of these upheavals, Chinese families suffered from a host of economic, social, and political crises. Given the Confucian patriarchal tradition at the micro (household) level, these crises led to the total debasement of rural women's status, and their lives became dispensable.⁶⁶ As described in the first section, parents and brothers thought nothing of selling off daughters or sisters to human traffickers to serve as prostitutes, tea house serving girls, or domestic slaves. In British Columbia, even in the 1940s and 1950s, parents sold their Canadian-born daughters' birth certificates for profit.⁶⁷

During this period, parental decisions were also largely responsible for young village women in South China being married off as primary or secondary wives to Overseas Chinese men. In addition to the macro factors prevailing in China, an additional set of meso factors specific to the Pearl River Delta region were at play. In this region, due to the waves of male emigration since the mid-nineteenth century, overseas remittances were the major source of household income. Gold Mountain guests, during their return visits, openly displayed riches while hiding their real situations in their host country. Magnificent foreign-style houses, financed after many years of savings, and the relatively carefree lifestyle of Overseas Chinese households in the village, dazzled parents of eligible daughters. What better way to ensure economic security amidst national turmoil than to marry a daughter to a Gold Mountain guest, however old and unattractive the latter might be?⁶⁸

The collection of folk songs from Taishan County provides many examples of how the aforementioned macro- and meso-level forces entered the micro-level awareness of peasant households.⁶⁹ While the lyrics of these songs confirm the parents' favourable view of marrying

⁶⁶ Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 66-107.

⁶⁷ Chong, *The Concubine's Children*; Woon, *The Excluded Wife*.

⁶⁸ Zhang, *Lingnan Wuyi*, 35-7; Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold*, 216; Chong, *The Concubine's Children*, 18, 41-3. Existing literature in all periods shows a large age gap between young village women and their husbands from Gold Mountain. For such cases in the pre-1947 period, see Nip and Wong, *Under the Willow Tree*; and Choy, *The Jade Peony*. For the large age gap in marriages occurring in the late 1940s and the 1950s, see Yip, *The Tears of Chinese Immigrants*, 78-9. For the present period, see Zhang, "Jiushiniandai Guangdong Wuyi Qiaoxiang Shewai Hunyin," 37-9.

⁶⁹ These folk songs, sung to the *muk-yue* tune, were a popular pastime among rural women in migrant communities in the Pearl River Delta region.

daughters to Gold Mountain guests, they also show a mixed picture of the mindset of the grass widows themselves. Some songs reflect the latter's satisfaction with the comfortable life provided by their absentee husbands; others are the laments of lonely grass widows pining for a beloved husband's return and expressing their desire for him to stay at home permanently, even if it means giving up remittances, a comfortable lifestyle, and the admiration of other villagers. These songs express envy of the family lives of peasant wives and anger at parents for forcing young women to marry Gold Mountain guests, and they advise other young village women not to follow in the footsteps of the village's grass widows.⁷⁰

Other published materials reveal a somewhat different picture: some married women in South China were in fact reluctant to live with their husbands if it meant moving to Gold Mountain. Chong's grandmother May Ying, for example, threw a temper tantrum upon learning that she had to go to Vancouver to join her husband Chan Sam.⁷¹ Similarly, the pioneer wives/concubines in Canada depicted in Nip and Wong's documentary longed to return to their home community.⁷² In addition, according to my interviews and those of Hsu,⁷³ many grass widows in South China strongly denied that they missed their absentee husbands. They preferred to stay in the village alone rather than to go overseas. Thus, without denying that white racism and severe immigration restrictions have played a major role in husbands' unwillingness (or inability) to bring their wives to Canada,⁷⁴ it is apparent that, in many instances, the wives themselves were also reluctant to leave South China. Even the lifting of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1947 did not immediately trigger a large influx of grass widows from South China to Canada. It took another major macro-level factor – namely, the rigorous Land Reform Campaign (1951-53) conducted by the newly established PRC government – to push these women into undertaking the treacherous journey to Hong Kong or Macao so that their husbands could sponsor them to Canada.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Taishan Qiaowu Bangongshi, *Taishan Huaqiao Zhi*, 170-5; Zhang, *Lingnan Wuyi*, 35-7, 40-3; Tan, "Jinshanxiang Shou Kongwei," 9-13; Yip, *The Tears of Chinese Immigrants*, 78-9; Wu and Li, "Gum San Haak," 30-1.

⁷¹ Chong, *The Concubine's Children*, 7-10.

⁷² Nip and Wong, *Under the Willow Tree*.

⁷³ Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold*, 11-3.

⁷⁴ Despite the abolition of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1947, Chinese Canadians still faced numerous bureaucratic obstacles when trying to bring their spouses and dependent children to Canada. See Roy, *The Triumph of Citizenship*, 170-2, 264-6.

⁷⁵ According to Canadian immigration statistics, between 1947 and 1950, only a total of 788 ethnic Chinese (spouses or dependent children of Canadian citizens) entered the country. By

By contrast, with the removal of most immigration hurdles in the late 1970s, young village women in South China, with the encouragement of their parents, were eager to marry someone from Canada and to leave the country after the wedding. During my rounds of fieldwork in the 1980s and 1990s, I observed that parents would do anything to attract the attention of Overseas Chinese visitors. They had put their daughters through high school to learn English in order to facilitate communication with foreign nationals; they sought out the services of marriage go-betweens and/or distributed photographs of their daughters to Overseas Chinese visitors. Some even tried to arrange fraudulent marriage contracts.⁷⁶ Young village women themselves were equally enthusiastic. In order to create opportunities to meet eligible Overseas Chinese men, they found employment as waitresses, receptionists, or cashiers in trendy restaurants, cafes, or shopping malls located in Overseas Chinese hotels. I witnessed one case in which numerous young village women had lined up in the hallway on one hotel floor, where they waited to be “interviewed” by a returning foreign national who was looking for a bride.⁷⁷

How does one explain such eagerness among the present generation of parents and daughters in the Pearl River Delta region to build marriage alliances with returning Overseas Chinese men? Unlike in previous years, there are few macro-level push factors present: these people do not suffer from extreme economic desperation, social dislocation, or political persecution.⁷⁸ On the contrary, families have become more affluent

contrast, for the period between 1951 and 1953, when China was conducting the Land Reform Campaign, this number increased dramatically to 6,782 – an increase of more than eightfold. See Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 297.

⁷⁶ In Kaiping County, there is a private concern called *Aishen* (Goddess of Love) that specializes in introducing young village women to prospective grooms from Gold Mountain. See Woon, “Qiaoxiang Mentality,” 57, 59; “From Mao to Deng,” 163. During my fieldwork, more than one villager in Kaiping County tried to bribe me with C\$20,000 to arrange a fake marriage between their daughter and my son. Such attempts at setting up fraudulent marriages were in fact quite commonplace. In Taishan City, everyone seems to know people who have left for Gold Mountain through such means. I learned of a case in which a Chinese-American woman in Chicago made a fortune by sequentially marrying and divorcing several young men from Taishan in order to get each of them permanent resident status in the United States. It is interesting that fraudulent practices to gain entrance to Canada existed in all periods. In the Exclusion era, many tried to enter as “returning citizens.” In the period between 1947 and 1967, they posed as “dependent children” of Chinese Canadian families. Currently, fake marriage contracts are used.

⁷⁷ For dramatized accounts of the craze for marrying Overseas Chinese, see Woon, *The Excluded Wife*, 266–7, 280–1.

⁷⁸ This is not to deny that there are sporadic social disturbances and periodic protest movements in different parts of China, although these are not yet strong enough to topple the central government.

and secure with the present-day Communist government's pursuit of economic modernization and national wealth, and the substitution of "market socialism" for Maoist radical socialism. With the opening of Shenzhen, Zhuhai, and the rest of the Pearl River Delta region to direct foreign investment in the early 1980s,⁷⁹ and the increasing economic and political integration between Guangdong Province and Hong Kong in the 1990s, this part of China has emerged as the "fifth dragon" of East Asia. The local people's standard of living and quality of life are among the highest in the country.

Alongside increased affluence, women's legal status has improved and the social vision of young village women has widened. Thanks to Mao, "feudal practices" – including blind marriages, prostitution, domestic slavery, concubinage, and human trafficking – are now banned.⁸⁰ With growing earning power and the Marriage Law on their side, present-day young village women in the Pearl River Delta region no longer have to blindly follow the wishes of their parents with regard to choice of mate. They have greater opportunities than did their forebears to be educated, to leave the village, and to land a decent job in the city.⁸¹ With the increasing influx of Western cultural influences filtered through Hong Kong media and popular culture, they are more and more exposed to the idea of romantic love and the possibilities of alternate lifestyle choices.

Yet, despite these legal, economic, and cultural changes at the macro level, all of which favour the status of women in South China, village women are still eager to marry Overseas Chinese men whom they barely know. The key to this odd behaviour pattern lies with the interactions of two other factors: meso forces generated within Overseas Homeland communities themselves and micro forces such as Confucian family values, which are still pervasive in rural China.⁸²

⁷⁹ This is a major policy reversal. During the Maoist regime, Guangdong, being a border province, was deliberately left undeveloped for fear of foreign attack. By contrast, Deng opened up this part of China as soon as he gained power, his purpose being to use it as the first window to the West and to attract Hong Kong investment.

⁸⁰ This is not to deny that prostitution and hidden concubinage are widespread phenomena in modern China or that human trafficking has re-emerged. Women in interior China can find themselves kidnapped and sold to farmers in the coastal provinces as wives. However, these practices have been officially illegal at least since 1949. Currently, there are periodic campaigns to suppress "spiritual pollution" and "economic crimes," resulting in the perpetrators of such practices being severely punished.

⁸¹ This is not to deny that in present-day PRC there is widespread discrimination against women in the job market.

⁸² For more detailed and complete accounts of the various push and pull factors for female marriage migration to Gold Mountain, see Woon, "From Mao to Deng," 144, 147-9, 159-68; "Qiaoxiang Mentality," 46-8, 53, 60; Wu and Li, "Gum San Haak," 32-4; Zhang, "Jiushinandai Guangdong Wuyi Qiaoxiang Xinyimin," 39; Fong, "Where Do They Belong?" 67.

Ever since the late 1970s, when the PRC reversed its policy towards Overseas Chinese, there has been a dramatic increase in the amount of remittances and expensive gifts sent to direct relatives in the Pearl River Delta region. Foreign-style houses, confiscated by the Maoist government, have been returned to their original owners and have been beautifully renovated by Overseas Chinese relatives who have also financed the construction of new homes. Their generous donations have refurbished emigrant villages and provided villagers with many modern facilities. During this influx, local inhabitants were dazzled by the personal riches flaunted by numerous visitors from Hong Kong, Macao, North America, Australia, and elsewhere.⁸³ Given the absence of any major immigration hurdles since the late 1970s, parents in these communities strongly believe that upward family mobility can be achieved through building marriage alliances with Overseas Chinese from Gold Mountain.

However, such a prospect may not have prompted young village women to agree to marry a perfect stranger from a far-off land had they not been socialized to place family imperatives for economic advancement ahead of individual happiness.⁸⁴ Their very eagerness to sacrifice themselves for their family is testimony to the fact that thirty years of radical Maoism and over two decades of market socialism and Western cultural influences have not erased Confucian family values in modern China. In fact, it can even be argued that the One Child Policy and the re-emergence of female infanticide in Chinese villages since the 1980s have reinforced rural women's traditionally low self-esteem.⁸⁵ Just as with the South Chinese women of an earlier generation, so with the South Chinese women of today: functioning as the family's bridge

⁸³ As in the past, Overseas Chinese visitors tend not to mention the economic hardship suffered in their host country. However, the fact remains that, in the present period, despite the greater economic opportunities in South China, remittances from abroad are still the largest factor in income variation between households in emigrant communities. See Woon, "From Mao to Deng," 144-9, 159-68.

⁸⁴ In the Confucian cultural tradition, which stresses filial piety, individuals are socialized to put the well-being of the family ahead of their own aspirations or happiness. To ensure economic survival or upward mobility for the whole unit, heads of households often arbitrarily send daughters away to build marriage alliances and send sons away to pursue various vocations in distant locations. For a classic case study of Chinese family strategies, see Myron R. Cohen, *House United, House Divided: The Chinese Family in Taiwan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976). See also Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 18-21, 124-7. For the persistence of this approach to a family's collective well-being in present-day Mainland China, see Myron R. Cohen, "Family Management and Family Division," *China Quarterly* 130 (1992): 357-77.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth J. Croll, *From Heaven to Earth: Images and Experiences of Development in China* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 198-212.

to the legendary riches of Gold Mountain may be an act of filial piety whose purpose is to thank their parents for their very existence and to compensate for their sense of worthlessness. As described earlier, this mindset may explain the willingness of out-of-town brides from the Pearl River Delta region to submit to a potentially abusive marital relationship in British Columbia.

Thus, in very broad strokes, the above analysis suggests that one way of understanding the differences and similarities in the mindset and behaviour patterns of these two cohorts of South Chinese women involves situating them within the context of macro, meso, and micro forces. Without being crassly deterministic, the interaction of these forces at different periods of time has had a significant impact on the different life trajectories of Chinese pioneer women, grass widows, and out-of-town brides. It is hoped that future scholars will fill in the inevitable gaps in this overview and continue to research not just the sending and receiving communities but also the links between the two. It is only through an examination of the lived experience of those who emigrated as well as of those who stayed behind that the implications of international migration can be fully appreciated.