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White Canada and Asian Exclusion: Chinese and Japanese Immigrants (1858–1949)

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Abstract

The paper examines the historicity of racial discrimination against two pioneer Asian communities in Canada: Chinese and Japanese. It explores the reasons behind the advent of Chinese immigrants after the discovery of the gold rush in British Columbia and their role in railway construction, followed by the Japanese immigrants in the last quarter of the 19th century. The paper also highlights the economic roles played in the development of British Columbia by both these communities. The paper, in its core, emphasises the discrimination meted out to these communities through legislative, economic, and social measures despite their contributions. The study analyses key exclusionary policies, including the Chinese head tax, the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, and the 1908 Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan, which restricted immigration while maintaining diplomatic relations. It further explores political disenfranchisement, occupational segregation, and social marginalisation faced by these communities. The paper also paid attention to the intensification of racial hostility during the Second World War against the Japanese community and its culmination in the internment and forced displacement of Japanese Canadians. Ultimately, the paper argues that the experiences of Chinese and Japanese immigrants reveal the deeply embedded race-centric foundation of Canadian immigration policies until the end of the first half of the 20th century.

Keywords: *Canada, China, Japan, Immigration, British Columbia.*

Introduction

Canada is known as the country that welcomes migrants in the modern world. Canada has a long history of immigration. In fact, historically, Canada is a country which was shaped, structured, and supported by immigration. Since confederation in 1867, more than 17 million immigrants have come to Canada.¹ Long before the arrival of immigrants, Canada was inhabited by the indigenous population. This indigenous population comprises several communities such as First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. They were the original inhabitants of Canada. However, with the arrival of European immigrants from the late 15th century onwards, a new era in the history of Canada began. The arrival of Europeans significantly altered demographic and political landscapes, resulting in the dispossession and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples.² The next centuries, driven by the quest to conquer more colonies, saw a struggle between France and England in various parts of

¹ Izumi Sakamoto et al., 'Social Inclusion of Japanese Canadians: A View from Toronto,' *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*, Vol. 26, no. 2–3, 2016, p. 103.

² Gordon Gibson, *A New Look at Canadian Indian Policy: Respect the Collective-Promote the Individual*, Fraser Institute, Vancouver, 2009, pp. 3-4.

the world. In Canada, too, these two colonial powers competed to establish colonies in Canada. However, England succeeded in this venture, and Canada was relinquished to England after the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763. In the 19th century, immigration became a tool for territorial expansion and economic development in Canada, as the western part of Canada still had a low population at this time. On the other hand, European countries with the steep rise in their population and comparatively low job availability, were compelled to search for new lands in the world. Thus, the 19th century witnessed significant migration movements from the British Isles towards Canada, driven by devotion to the British Crown and cultural compatibility. The British government also encouraged their natives to migrate to Canada by introducing various programs such as free land grants. The principal aim behind the introduction of such programs was to settle their loyalists in the colony. In subsequent decades, the source countries were expanded to include Northern and Western European nations, resulting in migration from Germany, Poland, Italy, and Belgium.³ In 1867, the British Parliament passed the British North America Act, which created the Dominion of Canada. The colonies of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the Province of Canada amalgamated to become a single Dominion known as Canada, later joined by other colonies. At this time, the population of Canada reached 3.4 million, followed by the recent waves of European immigration. After that, over the ensuing century until 1967, Canada's immigration laws consistently rewarded white immigrants,⁴ particularly of British origin protestant while discouraging immigration from other races.⁵ The primary objective of immigration laws during this era was to establish Canada as a nation exclusively for White individuals.⁶ The outcome of these discriminatory measures was evident in the 1901 census of Canada, which indicated that almost 96% of the overall population was of European descent.⁷ Even in the 2021 Canada Census, around 70% of the total population of Canada was reported to be of European or North American origin. This data is testimony to the fact how Canada government deliberately encourage white immigrants while discouraging non-white immigrants.⁸

Canada's formal immigration policy often regarded immigrants as prospective permanent residents. However, this did not apply to Asian immigrants who arrived in Canada during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During this period, the Canadian government implemented several preventive measures against Asian immigration, which were discussed in through manner in the subsequent portion of this paper. The immigration policies of the Canadian government introduced several measures that were intended to remove Asian immigrants, aiming to maintain a

³ Sandeep K. Dhillon, 'Canadian Punjabi Diaspora', in S Irudaya Rajan (ed.), *India Migration Report 2024: Indians in Canada*, Routledge, New York, 2025, pp. 290-291.

⁴ Yasmeen Abu-Laban & Christna Gabriel, *Selling Diversity: Immigration, Multiculturalism, Employment Equity and Globalization*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2002, pp.37-38.

⁵ Tania Das Gupta, 'Political Economy of the gender, race and class: Looking at South Asian immigrant women in Canada'. In *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 26(1), p.65.

⁶ Ali Kazimi, *Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru an illustrated story*, Douglas &McIntyre Publishers inc., Vancouver, 2011, p. 8.

⁷ Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Canada, 1911*, Ottawa, Government of Canada, 1912.

⁸ Sajaudeen Chapparban, 'The immigrant policies of Canada and Racism: A Postcolonial Reading of the Indian Experience', in S Irudaya Rajan (ed.), *India Migration Report 2024: Indians in Canada*, Routledge, New York, 2025, pp. 290-291.

predominantly white demographic, and discouraging their immigration in the first half of the 20th century. Even in 1947, Canadian Prime Minister W. L. Mackenzie King, while speaking on the immigration policy in Canadian Parliament, justified these discriminatory policies. His speech includes the following remarks about immigration:

“With regard to the selection of immigrants, much has been said about discrimination. I wish to make it quite clear that Canada is perfectly within her rights in selecting the persons whom we regard as desirable future citizens. It is not a ‘fundamental right’ of any alien to enter Canada. It is a privilege. It is a matter of domestic policy. Immigration is subject to the control of the parliament of Canada.”⁹ Therefore, in this era, when the Canadian government’s formal immigration policies were full of discrimination against non-white races, it seems worth analysing the experiences of Asian immigrants in this period. The notable Asian communities who immigrated during this period were Chinese, Japanese, and Indian. Coincidentally, the epicentre of all three Asian communities was the British Columbia province of Canada. Owing to its geographical location, this western province was the last option for European immigrants but the first for Asian immigrants, since it lies on the Pacific coast. The paper comprises two parts dedicated to Chinese and Japanese immigrants, respectively. The paper in core is an attempt to discuss arrival, restrictions, discrimination, and treatment meted out to these communities upon their arrival in Canada.

Chinese

The Chinese were the first Asian community to arrive in Canada. The migration of Chinese migrants to Canada began in 1858 after the discovery of gold mines in British Columbia. The initial Chinese immigrants came from the coastal provinces of Guangdong and Fujian.¹⁰ In those times, China suffered from economic crisis and internal turbulence. The major reason for this condition was the regular invasions of China by Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, Russia, Austria, and the United States in the second half of the 19th century. These foreign invasions destroyed China’s local handicraft industries and replaced them with a commodity market in which they sold their finished products. On the other hand, China also struggled with the growing population and several natural disasters, which resulted in an imbalance of food supply. All these push factors at home prompted Chinese people from the coastal provinces of Guangdong and Fujian to venture abroad. In the initial stage, they reached Australia, Southeast Asia, and the United States as contract labourers, while some of them were merchants, students, miners and independent workers. Here, they found employment in plantations and mines. In 1858, when gold mines were discovered in British Columbia, Chinese workers from adjacent San Francisco and California started pouring into British Columbia. In the following year, Chinese immigrants came into British Columbia directly from Hong Kong. It is estimated that by 1860, 6,000-7000 Chinese immigrants had arrived in British Columbia. Barkerville town in British Columbia, which was famous for gold mines, became the hub of the first Chinese community in Canada.

⁹ Robert Vineberg, “Continuity in Canadian Immigration Policy 1947 to Present: Taking a Fresh Look at Mackenzie King’s 1947 Immigration Policy Statement,” in *International Migration & Integration*, 12, 2011, pp. 202-203.

¹⁰ Xiaoping Li and Jo-Anne Lee, ‘Chinese in Canada’, in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World*, Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, and Ian Skoggard (eds.), Springer, New York, 2005, p. 646.

As mentioned earlier, the British Parliament passed the British North America Act in 1867, which created the Dominion of Canada. The province of British Columbia joined this confederation in 1871. Among other terms and conditions constituted at the time of confederation, the federal government of Canada agreed to construct a railway line which connected British Columbia to the railway system of Canada supposed to be completed in the next 10 years. This railway line connects the British Columbia province with Eastern Canada.¹¹ British Columbia suffered a long period of economic crisis during the 1860s and 1870s, resulting in a huge amount of out-migration from the province. Thus, in the 1880s, there was a huge scarcity of White labourers in British Columbia. The construction of the CPR section of British Columbia was set to start in 1880. An experienced engineer from New York, Andrew Onderdonk, was awarded the contract for this construction. He had prior experience working with the Chinese labourers in America. Thus, he decided to hire Chinese labour to compensate for the scarcity of white labourers.¹² Almost 6500 Chinese migrants were employed in the construction of the CPR between 1880 and 1884, against the total strength of 15701 who reached Canada in this period. They had done this work in adverse conditions.

During this period, they were welcomed and favoured by the Canadian government because they were needed. They not only provided manpower to complete the construction of CPR but also did so at cheap rates. However, as soon as the construction of the CPR was completed, there was a huge twist in the attitude of the British Columbia provincial government towards Chinese migrants. The voices against Chinese immigration began to rise since their arrival in British Columbia. They were accused of working on lower scales than white workers and accused of taking away their jobs. The first official documented opposition against them was recorded in 1872, when John Robson, representative from Nanaimo, presented a motion against Chinese immigration and proposed an annual tax of 50\$ upon them. His motion was not accepted, but he succeeded in getting support from several leading newspapers of British Columbia. He moved several other motions, but they were all disapproved. However, in 1875, he found a huge success in his campaign against Chinese immigrants when he succeeded in passing a bill which sought disenfranchisement of Chinese migrants.¹³ All these events fuelled the narrative against Chinese immigration, and the following years saw various attempts to restrict their further immigration. In 1878, the British Columbia government passed a bill which prohibited Chinese immigrants from being employed on any type of provincial work. However, this bill was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of British Columbia. In 1879, the matter of Chinese immigration was carried to the Canadian Parliament by the members of the Parliament from British Columbia, but they failed in getting any kind of measures against Chinese immigrants. This movement against Chinese immigration was followed by the petitions from the city councils of Victoria and several other cities in British Columbia. A member of parliament representing Victoria, Noah Shakespeare, introduced a motion in the House of Commons of Canada to prohibit further Chinese immigration

¹¹ *Papers in Connection with the Construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway*, Government Printing Office, Victoria, 1880, p. 176.

¹² Adrian Ma, *How the Chinese Created Canada*, Dragon Hill Production Ltd., Canada, 2010, pp. 35-52.

¹³ Cheng Tien Fang, *Oriental Immigration in Canada*, The Commercial Press Limited, Shanghai, 1931, pp. 38-39.

by alleging unfair economic competition posed by the Chinese workers to White workers. He was supported by his fellow parliamentarian on this issue. During the debate on this matter on April 30, the Prime Minister of Canada opposed this motion by citing the need for Chinese labourers in the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway. The motion was rejected by the House of Commons.¹⁴ The efforts to restrict Chinese immigration remained unsuccessful till the completion of the CPR in 1885.

As soon as the construction of the CPR was completed, the Canadian government passed legislation imposing a head tax of \$50 on Chinese immigrants entering Canada. This head tax was further increased to \$100 in 1900 and \$500 in 1903.¹⁵ However, by 1923, when around 82,000 Chinese arrived in Canada, the government introduced the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, which completely stopped Chinese immigration into Canada. Although the imposition of paying \$500 as a head tax was a big amount at that time, Chinese immigrants continued to pour into Canada. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923 succeeded in getting the desired result. It not only stopped fresh immigration but also resulted in a sharp reduction in the Chinese population in the following decades. Since the majority of Chinese immigrants were male with their families at home, after the 1923 Act, it was now virtually impossible for them to invite their families to join them in Canada. They were already stripped of their civil and political rights in Canada. Along with this, the racial discrimination, economic hardships, and unwelcoming nature of Canada also contributed to the reduction of the Chinese population, which remained only 34,627 by 1941.¹⁶

The Chinese community was the first Asian community to arrive in Canada, and also the first to encounter racial discrimination in Canada. This discrimination ranges from their daily lives to workplaces and at the government level. They were denied provincial voting rights in 1875 by the British Columbia parliament or provincial government. This resulted in being barred from holding public offices and entry to several professions, such as law, pharmacy, and several other professions, since entry to these professions required a person's name on the provincial voter list. Thus, this measure not only infringed their political rights but also, they were confined them to low-paying and manual menial labour. As a result, they were forced into occupations such as laundries, restaurants, and domestic services. In their daily lives, they were forced to live in segregated accommodations and were prohibited from entering certain hotels reserved only for white people. They were among the primary victims of the Anti-Asian riots that happened in Vancouver on September 7, 1907, in which a mob vandalised and looted their shops, businesses, homes, and community centres. Thus, discrimination against Chinese immigrants was widespread in Canadian society, which continued until 1947. In 1947, after the end of the Second World War, Canada government decided to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Act. This was the result of the political movements organised by the Chinese community along with the growing international

¹⁴ *Official Reports of the Debates of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada*, 1st Session, 5th Parliament, Vol. XIV, Maclean, Roger & Co., Ottawa, 1883, pp. 904–907.

¹⁵ Contance Backhouse, *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada 1900-1950*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2019, p. 162.

¹⁶ *Canada Census 1941*, Vol. 2., Ministry of Trade and Commerce, Ottawa, 1944, p. 271.

pressure against racial discrimination.¹⁷ The Chinese migrants were granted their due civil and political rights. The year 1947 marked the end of racial exclusion of Chinese immigrants and heralded a new era in which the Chinese community contributed extensively to the growth of Canada.

Japanese

The Japanese were the second Asian community to arrive in Canada after the Chinese community. The reason for the Japanese arrival in Canada was attributed to economic hardships in Japan caused by small landholding, rapidly growing population and higher taxation levied to pay for Japan's modernisation programme.¹⁸ The first Japanese immigrant arrived in 1877, followed by small numbers of fellow countrymen until 1896. Thereafter, Japanese immigration began to rise significantly. From 1896 to 1900, 12,788 Japanese immigrants arrived in Canada. In the following decade, 13,441 Japanese immigrants entered Canada. However, upon arrival in Canada, the majority of them soon embarked for the United States, leaving only half in Canada. The Census of Canada authenticates this fact as it records 4,738 Japanese in 1901 and 9,021 in 1911. The rising number of Japanese migrants in Canada alarmed the labour unions and politicians of British Columbia. Soon, the anti-Chinese feelings of British Columbia society converted into anti-Orientalists. The Japanese migrants were employed in boat building, railroad construction, fishing, lumbering, and mining industries. Soon, they established considerable control over the boat-building and fishing industries, and it was perceived as an economic threat to white labourers.¹⁹ There was strong public opposition from British Columbia society against Japanese migrants, which resulted in the anti-Asian riots of 1907, where they suffered major losses alongside Chinese migrants.²⁰ After these riots, the Canadian government, in November 1907, sent Mr Rodolphe Lemieux, Minister of Labour, to prevent further migration from Japan. He signed an agreement with the Japanese government known as a gentleman's agreement.²¹ By this agreement, the Canadian government succeeded in restricting Japanese immigration and limited it to four hundred immigrants per year. The families of already existing Japanese immigrants were allowed. This led to a significant change in the nature of Japanese immigrants. Before this agreement, the majority of Japanese immigrants were single male comes to Canada with a sojourner mentality. However, after this agreement, the majority of Japanese immigrants were women. The following three decades were of controlled immigration in which well over four hundred Japanese immigrants continued to arrive in Canada. However, due to continuously growing anti-Japanese sentiment in British Columbia, the gentlemen's agreement was amended in 1928, and the revised conditions allowed only 150 Japanese immigrants per year. This led to a huge decrease in Japanese

¹⁷ Robert Vineberg, "Continuity in Canadian Immigration Policy 1947 to Present: Taking a Fresh Look at Mackenzie King's 1947 Immigration Policy Statement," in *International Migration and Integration*, Vol. 12, no. 2, Springer, 2011, p. 203.

¹⁸ W. Peter Ward, *The Japanese in Canada*, Canadian Historical Association, Ottawa, 1982, p. 3.

¹⁹ B. Singh Bolaria and Peter S. Li, *Racial Oppression in Canada*, Garamond Press, Toronto, 1988, p. 107.

²⁰ Norman Buchignani, Doreen M. Indra, and Ram Srivastava, *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada*, McClelland and Stewart Ltd. & The Canadian Publishers, Toronto, 1985, p. 22.

²¹ Cheng Tien Fang, *Oriental Immigration in Canada*, The Commercial Press Limited, Shanghai, 1931, pp. 123-125.

immigration. After the commencement of the Second World War in September 1939, immigration from Japan completely ceased.

Before the advent of the Japanese community in Canada, the Chinese, the pioneer Asian community, was a victim of racial discrimination, as discussed thoroughly in the concerned segment of this paper. Upon their arrival in British Columbia, the Japanese community was meted out the same treatment. Already prevailing anti-Chinese sentiments of British Columbia society now included the Japanese, too. Initially, they were in small numbers; thus, they went unnoticed. In the last decade of the 19th century, when their numbers started rising, the first anti-Japanese measure was made in the British Columbia legislature. A motion was introduced to raise the head tax on Chinese immigrants from \$50 to \$200. An amendment was made to include Japanese as well in this motion. However, the motion was withdrawn. The rising number of Japanese invited petitions from labour unions, trade councils, and miners demanding restrictions on Japanese from working in the mines in the subsequent years. Their collective resistance against Japanese immigration bore fruit in 1895 when Japanese migrants were deprived of the right to vote in the British Columbia provincial legislature.²² The other several measures, including a complete restriction on Japanese immigration, failed due to the growing friendship between the British Empire and Japan. The federal government of Canada, well aware of the situation, denied approval of several bills introduced against the Japanese. However, the British Columbia legislative assembly passed several bills against Japanese migrants, which drew objections from the Japanese Consul General in Vancouver. The Japanese immigrants received enormous support from their home government on several matters. From 1896 to 1901, the growing number of Japanese in the fishing, boat-building, and mining industries concerned the white labourers. Their ability to provide material at cheap rates and working on low wages created their considerable control over these businesses and drove out white labourers from these professions. In all these years, the Canadian government has requested several times that the Japanese government restrict immigration to Canada, which has produced some success. However, after 1905, Japanese immigration rose significantly. In the following two years, 3964 Japanese immigrants entered Canada. British Columbia tried to stop this influx by passing the Immigration Act, but disallowed by the government of Canada. Left in a lurch, the anti-Orientalist sentiments of British Columbia's people resulted in anti-Asian riots on September 7, 1907, which occurred losses of around \$9200 to Japanese immigrants. As mentioned earlier, the Japanese government objected strongly to this incident. The Canadian government paid compensation to Japanese immigrants affected by these riots. Following the gentlemen's agreement, immigration from Japan decreased significantly over the years, which continued until 1939 before the onset of the Second World War. During this period, they were subjected to the same treatment as suffered by the Chinese community. Their civil and political rights have already been violated. They were forced to live in a certain segregated portion of the city. At workplaces, they were assigned arduous work denied to white labourers. Still, they were paid less than white workers. In the 1930s, economic hardships caused by the Great

²² *Statutes of British Columbia*, Victoria, 1895, p. 73.

Depression intensified racial tensions in British Columbia society. The Japanese, along with Chinese workers, were blamed for unemployment by white labourers.

The Second World War started in September 1939. Canada, as a dominion of the British Empire, was obliged to take part in the war. Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941, commenced a period of great hardships for Japanese living in Canada. The total number of Japanese living in Canada at that time was 23,149.²³ Soon after, Canada declared war on Japan and wartime blackout measures were implemented in British Columbia. The Japanese were declared as potential threats. The whole Japanese population of Canada was forcibly uprooted from British Columbia into remote interior regions under difficult and restrictive conditions. They were distributed in various projects such as Road camp, Sugar-beet, interior housing, and in internment camps. Hence, they were scattered all across Canada. Their properties, including their houses and businesses, were confiscated and later sold by the Canadian government without their consent.²⁴ Their freedom of movement was restricted by the Order-in-Council P.C. 1486, passed on February 24, 1942. The men were separated from their families. Thus, they were impacted socially, economically and psychologically by the actions of the Canadian government. Even after the war ended, the Japanese were offered two options by the Canadian government. The first option is to voluntarily repatriation to Japan, and the second is to be relocated to another province East of the Rockies. However, after organised protests by the Japanese community with the help of their sympathisers, the Canadian government was forced to halt the program. Nonetheless, by then, 3,964 Japanese were already deported from Japan.²⁵ The harsh treatment meted out to the Japanese community during these war years draws increasing opposition from various civil rights groups, churches and significant segments of the Canadian society who viewed these oppressions as unjust and unconstitutional. Along with this, the growing global pressure against racial discrimination prompted Canada to revoke its discriminatory measures against the Japanese community in a phased manner. The Canadian government removed all the restrictions upon the Japanese community by June 15, 1948. The British Columbia province granted voting rights to the Japanese community in March 1949. This marks the end of a period of racial discrimination against the Japanese community, and the following decades saw a notable contribution of the Japanese community to the Canadian economy.

Conclusion

The study established that racial discrimination against Chinese and Japanese immigrants in Canada between 1858 and 1949 was neither incidental nor temporary, but rather a systematic and institutionalised feature embedded in the racist immigration policy of Canada. Both communities entered British Columbia province of Canada at a time when there was a huge scarcity of labour. The Chinese migrants worked in the gold mines and were instrumental in the completion of railway construction in British Columbia, while Japanese migrants were engaged in the fisheries, boat

²³ *Canada Census 1941*, Vol. 2., Ministry of Trade and Commerce, Ottawa, 1944, p. 271.

²⁴ Tim Cook, 'Redressing Canada's Second World War Narrative,' *War & Society*, Vol. 39, no. 3, 2020, p. 223.

²⁵ Carol F. Lee, 'The Road to Enfranchisement: Chinese and Japanese in British Columbia', in *BC Studies*, 30, 1976, p. 60.

building, and mining industries. However, once they were utilised economically and physically, they were subjected to discrimination. Thus, they were required to go to Canada as labourers, not as citizens.

The treatment meted out to these communities reveals clear patterns of discrimination across multiple levels. Legislatively, the introduction of various preventive measures, such as the Chinese head tax, the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, alongside the Gentlemen’s Agreement with Japan, was designed to restrict Asian immigration while maintaining imperial and diplomatic considerations. Politically, denied voting rights and access to public offices to both Chinese and Japanese immigrants, effectively marginalising them from civic participation. Economically, they were confined to low-paying and manual labour, while socially they faced segregation, hostility, and violence, most notably reflected during the anti-Asian riots of 1907. The trajectory of these discriminations was intensified significantly during political and economic crises, especially during the economic depression of the 1930s and the Second World War. During economic depression, they were accused of unemployment by the white labourers. Similarly, the participation of Japan against the Allied powers in the Second World War resulted in the forced displacement and internment of Japanese Canadians. Their civil liberties were suspended, their properties confiscated, and the entire community was uprooted from British Columbia.

In the end, this study highlights that such discriminatory practices were not absolute since the postwar period witnessed a gradual shift in the official stance of the Canadian government, driven by organised protests, legal challenges, and emerging international norms against racial discrimination. The enfranchisement of the Chinese community in 1947, the Japanese community in 1949 and the eventual dismantling of restrictions upon Japanese by 1949 marked the beginning of a new era in which both these Asian communities contributed significantly to the making of a modern Canada.

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