

# “Glorious and free” One young woman’s hope for a racism-free Canada

by Ada Chan

*L’auteure explore les attitudes discriminatoires que les Chinois d’origine canadienne ont rencontrées dans le passé et nous fait partager sa propre expérience du racisme dans la société canadienne actuelle.*

“You! The one with the yellow face and slanted eyes!”

Our national anthem says that Canada is “glorious and free.” It is known all over the world that backpackers in Europe are welcomed with open arms when their Canadian flag is showing on their luggage. Countless people have immigrated to Canada where citizens are willing “to stand on guard” for their country. (In our national anthem, we are willing to do this three times, as a matter of fact.)

Two million people from different backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities inhabit the city of Vancouver where I grew up. As students, we had to memorize North American discrimination statistics and ponder their significance. Many of my classmates came up with the stereotypical conclusion that there are many people in the south who are “ig’ner,” who are not as open-minded as those who live in a country where diversity is celebrated. But despite this prevalent utopian fantasy, racism has a long history and continues to exist in Canada.

In the nineteenth century, Chinese workers heard about “Gam San” or “Gold Mountain,” the land of riches and great opportunities and came over here to start anew. From famines, wars, and disease, they found themselves in lonely and dirty conditions working in gold mines or for the CPR. They endured years of persecution, low wages, and dangerous working conditions, because coming to Canada offered them the opportunity to support their families in China.

What they might not have expected was the discrimination that came with the package. Because they were physically different from the norm of white Anglo-Saxon, they were treated differently. Chinese people were forbidden to live in certain areas of Vancouver, prohibited from practicing medicine (among other professions), and segregated into ethnic schools. Some Chinese houseboys were even blamed for murders in the “posh” Shaughnessy neighborhood of Vancouver because of their race.

If the face-to-face racism was not enough, the Canadian government implemented a head tax on Chinese people entering the country. At the turn of the century, Chinese immigrants had to pay a fee of \$50, which was later raised to \$100 and further increased to \$500. Furthermore, in

1923 the *Exclusion Act* was instituted, which only allowed Chinese diplomats or university students into Canada. The *Exclusion Act* was repealed after World War II, a war in which many Chinese Canadians served.

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An historical account of Chinese experience in Canada paints only a small portion of the portrait of racism. When the Canadian government repealed the race discriminatory legislation of the *Exclusion Act*, attitudes towards non-whites were deceptively hopeful. But obviously, that was only the beginning of the story of modern racism. We have all heard the stories: Ku Klux Klan meetings, the spray painting of malicious racist words on buildings in Chinese communities, and complaints about “foreigners” taking good Canadian jobs away from “Canadians.” Stories about young children who were teased at school and bullied because of their ethnic heritage are also touching. Although the stories of racism all had a chilling effect, they did not concern me.

Personally, I have only experienced a fraction of what we learned about racism from textbooks. When I first moved from Vancouver to Ottawa for a work study term, I was challenged to make several adjustments. I found that living in a city, which is smaller and less culturally diverse from Vancouver had an impact on me. (Perhaps the Ottawa neighbourhood I live in has a demographic make-up different from the middle-class, multi-cultural area of Vancouver I am from.) During my first month of the work term in Ottawa, I noticed a relative lack of cultural representation in the population. Most people on the streets are of European descent and are from different educational and social backgrounds. My neighbourhood is filled with homeless men wandering along the streets asking for change at the intersections.

One day, I was walking to buy weekly groceries and saw a man from the men’s shelter walking towards me and we started walking along the same path. As usual with all those who pass me by, I gave him a nod and a smile. He

passed by me, and as I caught him from the corner of my eye, he muttered: "Hi, chink." Disbelief struck me and I was momentarily caught off guard before I turned around in astonishment to finally utter a sharp "What?" By this time he was too far away and did not even turn his head to acknowledge my exclamation. As I neared the supermarket, I encountered another man in similar attire. This time I did not bother to even make eye contact. As he passed me, I heard him muttering something to do with "Chinese." I could only tell that it was negative.

The shock remained sickly within me for the rest of the evening. Although I realized that some of the wandering men might not have been sober, the two men had both uttered something racist. Of all the insults they could have

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said, it had to do with my ethnicity. The way that both encounters were casual and brief puzzled me. Such acute caustic remarks seemed out of place in the tranquil quaint city.

My initial reaction and feeling towards the two incidents also puzzled me. I wondered why such comments shock me. Then I had the realization that my limited exposure to racist acts and words made any form of racism and discriminatory slurs surprising. People say that ignorance is bliss. If we were forever sheltered from any discrimination maybe we would be happier and enjoy a fuller life. But deciding that I would not feel this way gave me a sense of control. Knowledge is boundless and infinitely fulfills us.

Students are learning about their surroundings and about themselves, as they encounter situations such as the ones I had while I was walking to the grocery store. They are moving further and further away from sheltered lives. Many university students have developed a cynical outlook on life because they have become well-acquainted with its harsh reality. I feel out of place with my idealist thoughts. The way knowledge about human nature's "evil" and "cruelty" gives some people a negative view on humanity becomes more understandable. This determinism makes individuals fatalistic; letting things slide and feeling that such corruption in our lives is irreversible. However, other people feel differently when encountering the same experience. While some feel a loss of control, others gain a sense of control. Knowing about something suddenly bestows a sense of responsibility. Social responsibility showers us with a right to action, to make an impact on the world. For students who are learning about themselves, ignorance is now harder to come by. Ironically, racist attitudes and comments are also rooted in ignorance.

Awareness that people have different views and see the world through a variety of lenses opens our eyes to the fact that just as people have different skin tones, they have different perspectives as well. In our society, we all want to be respected and to be treated equally, we have no right to judge at first physical glance. As people, we cannot change our skin colour, but we can change our views. Changing racist views is important because we should realize that we all have the same rights and abilities as those with different skin colour.

What was the appropriate reaction to the "attack" I experienced on the way to the grocery store? Thinking back, I blush at my passive reaction to what those men said to me. The weak excuse that I was recovering from shock shames me. Although I did turn around to retort a daring "What?" towards the direction of the first man I walked past that day, I knew that I would have run out of words to say if he had turned around to complete the exchange. Not knowing how to react disturbed me. The appropriate way to respond to any discriminatory remarks is subjective. After talking to various people who have experienced racism in one form or another, I noticed that different people have different ways of responding to it.

Like many others, my initial desire was to say a few nasty swear words, or as a friend did inside a car, give the middle-finger version of obscenity. Other than an ephemeral surge of catharsis, do such gestures achieve anything in the long run? Will the man walking on the sidewalk suddenly experience a revelation and change his behavior to be accepting and respecting of others? Like a sickness, using foul language may only cure the symptoms of the disease and not cure the disease itself. The perpetrator might not make racial comments to the person who retaliated any longer but continues to do so with other people of different cultures.

When I met up with the second man on my short walk, I began to feel the same way as some others who are targets of racism. I did not care any longer because I thought that no matter what I did, I could not have affected the way he views others. This "passive" way fits a deterministic paradigm of knowing yet not taking action, because of feeling helpless to effect change. This pessimistic view emphasized who I am. I am young, Chinese, and female, all characteristics that label me a typical "defenseless" segment of our population.

The popular view of Asians is that they are too passive, shy and do not "stand up" for themselves. Do they also carry with them this fatalistic thinking that the world was meant to be negative and things cannot be helped? The way we were brought up definitely has effects on us. However, there are no inborn genetic codes dictating the degree of passiveness of each individual. My Asian friends, who grew up in Canada, including myself should have North American values reflective of our media and our social environment.

But perhaps it is not an Asian view at all but a female

one. Many of us are programmed at a young age to deal with things in a calm and composed manner, like a "lady." Proper women do not react catastrophically towards problems with aggression or chaos. Females are looked on as being generally vulnerable so they are easier targets. Since they do not usually retaliate, they will not provide any threat to those who pursue such racist attitudes.

If I were male, does it make me less susceptible to racial attitudes and slurs? Males are seen as individuals who are more prone to take action against derogative actions. As women, we must transcend society's expectations and take action, stop the passivity. As girls, some of us are taught to laugh things off. If racist words become jokes, we cannot get hurt. The nervous laugh or giggle of such mockery reduces us to weak waif-like adults. But laughing or giggling to racist comments does not magically change cruel intentions into harmless fairytale fiction. We laugh because we are afraid to offend others or perhaps it is the only way we know how to respond at the moment.

As an individual who wants to make a positive impact in society through knowledge, I seem to be a walking contradiction. Gaining knowledge as a precursor for action is ideal. But I do not want to stop at such an initial stage. The primordial desire for equality beats with my heart and I use whatever knowledge I have in my possession as empowerment. Just as we learn about life and others attitudes through experience, those with discriminatory attitudes can learn about different cultures through experience. We should not only gain knowledge from being aware of others attitudes, but also gain knowledge on how to react when such discriminatory instances occur.

The shock of discriminatory actions may paralyze us initially, but unless we make known the atrocity of racism, we remain passive and awareness is wasted. Being assertive and at the same time reasonable, with our newly gained knowledge and awareness is empowering. If we do retaliate in a violent way, we can be labeled and the label will be reasonable because of our actions. If everybody who encounters racism is stronger and stands up for herself, perhaps individuals with racist attitudes will slowly realize people have equal rights regardless of skin tone.

The solution does not require us to gather as one to berate the individual aggressively but to use our experiences to become stronger. Each of us might be able to do only something minor but if all those who have experienced some discrimination do this little something, we can have a big impact. If we remain silent and laugh politely, we are not only lacking in self-defense but also indirectly confirming that racist individuals are right. This "action" can be anything from defending one's right of equality to reminding others how similar to each other we really are. Knowing that others are experiencing similar prejudices is important for our growth and support.

Society has certainly come a long way from the times of the CPR construction, the Head Tax and the *Exclusion*

*Act*. However, the racism battle is being fought every day of our lives. Issues such as biased media portrayal of the Chinese in Canada, and discrimination in social institutions have ignited Chinese Canadian social movements. Racism erosion is a long process and society still has a long way to go.

This is a call to all those who encounter racist attitudes or actions. The knowledge and awareness of vastly differing perspectives of others is a beginning of something potentially powerful. From that point on, we decide whether to utilize it in strengthening ourselves and educating others or to remain vulnerable to future discrimination. Let's work to counter racism and nurture equality in a land that is meant to be glorious and free.

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**KAREN U. LEE**

## **Insider-Outer**

In the meeting I sit  
caucasian academics  
quiet, passive  
the visible minority, I listen.

Discussions prevail  
a caustic remark  
"all the asians look the same"  
politics brings me to silence.

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