

# *under the willow tree*

## **Pioneer Chinese Women in Canada**

*"Pioneer women from China set the foundation for all those who came after.  
They planted the trees so we could enjoy the shade."*

— Dora Nipp, Director, *Under the Willow Tree*

A rich and little-known part of Canadian history unfolds through the stories of the first Chinese women to come to Canada and of subsequent generations of Chinese Canadian women.

It is an amazing tale of courageous women who left behind their families, knowing they would never see them again. It is the heart-wrenching odyssey of girls who were shipped off to the New World to marry men they had never met.

These are the women who fought against the many forms of racism they faced in Canada while, at the same time, challenging sexism within their own communities and striving to be more than 'dutiful daughters' and 'obedient wives.' By passing on language, culture, and values to their children, these women defined what it means to be Chinese Canadian.

Beautiful old photographs from family albums, the recollections of seven women who grew up in Canada in the first half of the 20th century, and the memories of narrator and director Dora Nipp, whose grandfather came to Canada in 1881 to build the railway, create a remarkable story of stunning impact.

Director: Dora Nipp  
Producer: Margaret Wong

52 minutes  
Order number: 9197 016



Closed captioned. A decoder is required.

**IN CANADA, CALL 1-800-267-7710**

**IN THE U.S., CALL 1-800-542-2164**



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## **Pioneer Chinese Women in Canada**

Pull out  
for  
User's Guide

### **BEFORE SCREENING THE VIDEO**

1. Make a family tree identifying your ancestors' names, birth-dates and countries of birth, up to a maximum of four generations. Using these as guides, participants can talk about who in their family was, or is, an immigrant and what their family members have brought to the history and development of Canada.
2. Explore stereotypes and popular images of Chinese people, especially those from earlier in the 20th century.
3. How are Asian people portrayed in your favourite TV shows and movies today? Do you think Asians were portrayed this way in the 1930s or 1950s? How were they portrayed then? (In today's media, being Asian American/Canadian is now seen as being pretty cool. But until the 1980s, Asian men were often portrayed as ineffectual weaklings; women were usually portrayed as exotic and mysterious sex objects).
4. Explore stereotypes and popular images of other ethnic groups.
5. Can a person experience both discrimination from society in general and from within their own ethnic/social group? What would be an example of this?

### **AFTER SCREENING THE VIDEO**

1. Why were Chinese men brought in to build the railways? Have other immigrant groups been brought to Canada to serve as cheap labour?
2. What was it like for the women who were left behind? What would it feel like for the children who were left behind?
3. What circumstances made it difficult for women to come to Canada?
4. Do you think that if these immigrants had been from England or France they would have faced the same exclusionary laws?

**Director**  
Dora Nipp

**Producer**  
Margaret Wong

**Editors**  
Margaret Wong  
MeiYen Chan

**Production  
Manager**  
Alyna Herscovici

**Cinematography**  
Savas Kalogeras

**Location  
Sound**  
Hans Oomes

**Photo Animation**  
Meilan Lam

**Original  
Music**  
Janet Lumb

**Music and Sound  
Editors**  
Danuta Klis  
Jean-Pierre Joutel

**Executive  
Producer**  
Ginny Stikeman

**Special Thanks To:**  
Agnes Lor  
Mabel Yee  
Emma Quon  
Jean Lumb  
Gladys Mah  
Norma Li  
Hazel Chong

5. Chinese women in Canada faced many obstacles (social, cultural and language barriers, racism and sexism). How would you have felt if you were in their place?

6. Judging from the video, can you describe the efforts of women from different generations to address the restrictions they faced?

7. What were some of the political, social and economic factors which caused many Chinese Canadian families to open restaurants, laundries, or small stores? How would it feel to be told there were things you could never be allowed to do, like go to university, be a lawyer or chartered accountant, or work for a bank or the government?

8. Did any of your family members or ancestors have experiences that were similar to the discrimination faced by Chinese immigrants to Canada? Did women in your family face double standards, experience different or lower expectations than the men, or have to work harder for what they wanted or believed in?

### **FOLLOW-UP PROJECTS**

1. Expand the information on your own family history. By talking to parents and relatives, and by working in the library, research why your family or your ancestors came to Canada. What hardships did they face in their homeland which made them want to come here? What hardships or forms of discrimination did they face in Canada? How did they work to end that discrimination?

If your family is Aboriginal, examine some of the similarities and differences between your relatives' experiences and those of immigrant families.

2. Interview an elderly female relative or friend. How was her life different from that of young women today? What expectations or limitations did she live with that young women today don't have to face? Was she able to rebel and find her own identity?

3. Monitor television, music videos, and movies for a week. How are Chinese and other Asian people portrayed? Are Asian women and men portrayed differently from each other? How are other ethnic and racial groups portrayed in the media? Who does this harm?

*There is no better way to learn about history than to look into the lives of the people who made it. This video takes the audience on a personal journey into the past. Told through first-hand narratives, it is a valuable resource providing insight into the experiences of almost-forgotten generations of Chinese Canadians.*

## RELATED NFB FILMS

**Return Home** (1992) A Chinese Canadian woman journeys back to her hometown in Alberta to get reacquainted with her aging grandparents. *Also available with Chinese subtitles.* Director: Michelle Wong Producers: Ginny Stikeman, Margaret Wong, Michelle Wong. 29 minutes. Order number: 9192 129

**Great Grand Mother** (1975) An appreciation of the women who settled the Prairies. Directors: Lorna Rasmussen, Anne Wheeler Producers: Kathleen Shannon, John Taylor in co-production with Filmwest Associates Ltd. 29 minutes. Order number: 0175 108

## OTHER RESOURCES

### Books

Chan, Anthony B. *Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World.* Vancouver: New Star Books, 1983.

Chong, Denise. *The Concubine's Children: Portrait of a Family Divided.* Toronto: Viking, 1994.

Con, Harry, et al. *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982.

Yee, Paul. *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver.* Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 1988.

### Fiction and Poetry

Burney, Shehla, ed. *Coming to Gum San: The Story of Chinese Canadians.* Toronto: D.C. Heath, 1995.

Lee, Bennet and Wong-Chu, Jim, eds. *Many Mouthed Birds: Contemporary Writing by Chinese Canadians.* Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 1991.

Lee, Sky. *Disappearing Moon Cafe.* Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 1990.

Yee, Paul. *The Curses of Third Uncle.* Adventures in Canadian History series. Toronto: Lorimer, 1986.

**1788** Chinese carpenters and craftsmen build a fort and schooner for a British fur trader on the west coast of Canada.

**1839-1842** Britain defeats China in the Opium Wars. China fails to stop Britain from bringing opium into China.

**1853** Chinese contract workers go to various Caribbean islands.

**1858** First Chinese gold miners arrive in Canada from San Francisco.

**1860** First Chinese woman lands in Victoria, British Columbia.

**1872** British Columbia disqualifies Chinese from voting.

**1877** Chinese-owned laundries are established in Toronto, Ontario.

**1881-1885** Fifteen thousand Chinese men build the Canadian Pacific Railway for \$1 per day. Hundreds die in accidents.

**1885** Canadian government levies a \$50 head tax on Chinese immigrants to Canada.

**1903** Head tax raised to \$500 (equivalent to about \$22,000 today). From 1885 to 1923, \$23 million was collected, equivalent to over \$1 billion in today's dollars.

**1907** Racist attitudes lead to an anti-Asian riot in Vancouver.

**1911** Republic of China established.

**1923** Federal government bans all Chinese immigration.

**1939-1945** Japan occupies China. Twenty-five million Chinese die. Hundreds of Chinese Canadian men and women serve in the Canadian army; Chinese Canadian community raises \$15 million for the war effort.

**1947** Chinese Immigration Act repealed. Limited immigration is allowed.

**1949** Chinese Revolution establishes the People's Republic of China, led by Mao Zedong.

**1957** Douglas Jung becomes the first Chinese Canadian elected to federal Parliament.

**1967** Increased immigration begins from Asia and other parts of the Third World.